

The Antebellum White Mistress: Culpability and Complexity in American Women's Retrospective Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis examines the character of the white mistress in retrospective fiction- *post hoc* works that revisit the slave-narrative tradition to revise the story told about antebellum slavery in the Southern states of America. The figure of the white mistress has been at worst ignored and at best marginalised in much fictional and critical output. I redress the balance by focusing on three novels which foreground the role of the white mistress. Through an exploration of the white mistress in Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Sherely Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1987) and Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003), I consider ways in which white female guilt in relation to slavery is represented. By responding to the work of Minrose Gwin, Toni Morrison and Ashraf Rushdy, among others, I extend the critical consideration given to the character of the plantation mistress. In Chapter One I explore how the female slave acts as a counterpoint for the white mistress, beginning by considering three stereotypes commonly associated with nineteenth-century southern women: the belle, the jezebel and the mammy. I argue that these stereotypes not only influence the relationship between the mistress and her slaves, but that the stereotypes themselves are troubled in retrospective fiction. In Chapter Two I explore familial responsibilities for the white mistress in relation to her husband and father and to her children. I argue that these novels expose how family ties are damaged not only for the slave but for the mistress in these novels, complicating any easy interpretation about the mistress's guilt. In Chapter Three I address the importance of the plantation setting in fiction about slavery. Specifically, I posit the plantation as a Gothic space for both the white mistress and her female slave, characterised by *das unheimliche*, claustrophobia and voyeurism. Although the white mistress is the principal focus of only a minority of retrospective novels about slavery, my thesis is driven by the increasing compulsion to confront this character's complicity in the South's peculiar institution.

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Introduction

To pity those that know her not

Is helped by the regret

That those who know her, know her less

The nearer her they get.

-Emily Dickinson (Poem 1400)

Revisiting the White Mistress Character in Fiction about Slavery

This thesis addresses the marginalisation of one of the key figures in fiction about antebellum American slavery: the white mistress. I offer an exploration of the literary representation of the white mistress, to consider the importance of this character in reaching an understanding of slavery as it is revisited, and re-evaluated, over time. In twentieth-century fiction by male American authors the white mistress is either completely absent or largely ignored, and for this reason my emphasis is on texts by American women writers.¹ Even so, in much of the fiction set in the slave South the white mistress is either relegated to a few cameo appearances, or demonised and dismissed.² Consequently, my study will focus in particular on three novels that depart from this trend and foreground the figure of the white mistress. Through an exploration of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) by Willa Cather, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams and *Property* (2001) by Valerie Martin, in addition to other novels, I address the fact that not only much of the fiction about slavery, but also the ensuing critical discussion, has somewhat overlooked the white mistress character in favour of presenting the experience of her counterpart, the female slave.³ I examine how the black female slave acts as a counterpoint for her white female owner, but the overall aim of my study is to offer a critical re-evaluation of the white mistress character.

¹ Key texts about slavery that have either no representative white mistress or which barely refer to a white mistress character include Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936), Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990). Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) does feature a white mistress, Emily Cartwright, but it is set in the West Indies so is beyond the remit of this thesis.

² Significant novels by women writers in which the white mistress appears briefly include Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

³ Additional significant novels by women writers that focus on the experience of a female slave include Barbara Chase Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991) and Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995). The female slave character continues to make an appearance in popular fiction; examples include Ann Rinaldi's *Hang A Thousand trees with Ribbons* (1996) and Geraldine Brooks's *March* (2005).

I agree with Hortense Spillers that scholars and writers seem ‘compelled’ to reinvent slavery anew for each generation.⁴ She comments on how ‘this field of enunciative possibilities—its horizons, its limits, its enabling postulates, and its placement in perspective with other fields’ is what allows slavery to remain one of the most ‘textualised and discursive fields of practice.’ Her interest lies in how slavery is made somehow real for each new generation and how this reinvention is ‘nothing other than an attempt to restore to a spatio-temporal object its eminent historicity, to evoke person/persona in the place of a “shady” ideal.’⁵ This project necessitates a re-evaluation of the roles of individuals in the institution of slavery as a way of accessing an historical perspective. Literature is the natural locus of the restoration Spillers has in mind. Writers continue to navigate historical realities as well as the way in which slavery has been historicised by text. I concur with Spillers that this is best articulated through looking again at the participants, and my specific interest in the re-evaluation of one of slavery’s key participants, the white mistress, is the main objective of this thesis.

In Fred D’Aguiar’s ironically titled ‘The Last Essay About Slavery’, he posits the possibility of ‘slavery-fatigue’, the idea that readers may be so saturated with ‘slavery’s songs, stories and arguments’ that the need for them may dissipate.⁶ Naturally, this idea is quickly dismissed by D’Aguiar.⁷ He proceeds to recognise the need of black writers to keep returning to slavery to ‘have slavery nuanced their way.’⁸ But what is particularly compelling in relation to this thesis is D’Aguiar’s insistence on the power of narrative to redefine boundaries and re-engage sympathies in the work of both white and black writers of the types of texts that most concern me. He

⁴ Hortense J. Spillers, ‘Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed’, in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.25-61 (p.29).

⁵ Spillers, p.28.

⁶ Fred D’Aguiar, ‘The Last Essay About Slavery’, in *The Age of Anxiety*, ed. by Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter (London: Virago, 1996), pp.125-147 (p.125).

⁷ Fred D’Aguiar is the author of two novels about slavery: *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998).

⁸ D’Aguiar, p.126.

claims convincingly that ‘whereas in the slave narrative the life of the slave is the subject of the story that the reader is privileged to overhear, in the slave novel that life is rendered in such a way that the reader becomes the subject, no longer able to sit outside it as witness but put in its place.’⁹ This is because retrospective fiction about slavery enacts the project of placing readers in the position of hindsight, which is also the place occupied by the writer and so both are obliged to negotiate the past. In my exploration of the white mistress character in American literature and with my particular emphasis on retrospective stories of slavery, I negotiate this place as it is occupied, in particular, by *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property*, because my interest is best served by exploring the places where slavery is re-invented in narrative form.

The term neo-slave narrative is usually attributed to Bernard Bell and was initially applied to *post hoc* first-person narratives that told the tale of slavery.¹⁰ Ashraf Rushdy later defines neo-slave narratives as ‘contemporary narratives of slavery that draw attention to [writers’] struggle to find a respectful way to give voice to the historically muted subjects of slavery.’¹¹ My interest corresponds to Rushdy’s interpretation of writers’ desire to restore the voice of the individuals involved in the story of slavery. Because of this emphasis on restoration and revision, I prefer to use the term ‘retrospective’ to refer to fiction about slavery, rather than neo-slave narrative, because the novels that concern me are not so much focused on new stories but on revisiting and revising the stories of the past. This is particularly so in relation to the character of the white mistress who has been marginalised even within the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. However, because the term draws attention to the undeniable correlation between nineteenth-century slave narratives, written by men and women in part as abolitionist propaganda, and fictional accounts of slavery written

⁹ D’Aguiar, p.141.

¹⁰ Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p.xi. Henry Louis Gates uses the term ‘slave narrative novel’ in his introduction to *The Slave Narratives*, ed. by Charles Davis and Henry L. Gates (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.i-xi (p.vii).

¹¹ Ashraf Rushdy, ‘The Neo-slave Narrative’ in *The African American Novel*, ed. by Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.87-105 (p.97).

years later, the term neo-slave narrative is not entirely an oversimplification.¹²

Additionally, the emphasis on the new succeeds in recognising some of the challenges posed by returning to the historical site of slavery as a source for fiction. Derek Walcott, in his essay 'The Muse of History', reflects upon writing about slavery:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the new world neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognise it as a creative or culpable force.[...] But who in the new world does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or revenge?¹³

Here, Walcott identifies difficulties faced by writers because confronting the history of slavery is an emotionally charged proposition. Slavery is doubtless associated with apportioning blame and experiencing guilt as much as it is associated with experiencing shame on the part of both the ancestors of slaves and of slave owners. The novels I consider in this thesis allow me to explore how culpability is addressed in retrospective fiction, specifically as this guilt applies to the character of the white mistress. Walcott's argument that the challenge is to forge an artistic response that does not see history itself as something that must be respected, even venerated, is refreshing. Here, the idea of 'new' can be applied to writers' ability to approach the old stories of slavery without the need to revere what Walcott refers to as 'historical truth.' So whilst the novels I consider follow Spiller's project of attempting to 'restore' some sense of 'historicity' to slavery, they do so whilst

¹² Production of antebellum slave narratives was prolific. Henry Louis Gates records that over 6,000 slave narratives, including over 100 book length versions, were produced between 1703 and the end of the American Civil War. See his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Signet Classic, 2002), pp.1-14 (pp.1-2).

¹³ Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.370-375 (p.371).

acknowledging that history is contingent.¹⁴ For this reason, too, I prefer the term retrospective as it conveys the idea of reflecting on and assessing the past as much as the concept of developing earlier forms, and thus a more complex literature emerges, centred on the re-evaluation of the past of plantation slavery, and involving more than simply ‘new’ versions of slave stories.

Revisiting slavery has been influential in significant novels by black and white American authors beginning with antebellum examples such as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853) and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), and including post-bellum examples such as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892). Examples from the first half of the twentieth century include Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* (1936) and, notably, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936).¹⁵ But it was from

¹⁴ Spillers, p.29.

¹⁵ Whilst both the book and the film of *Gone with the Wind* tend to enshrine Katie Scarlett O’Hara as the epitome of the southern white mistress in popular consciousness, she is not a fair representative either of historical or literary southern white plantation mistresses. Scarlett is not really a mistress at all and the world of the antebellum plantation is glimpsed only briefly in Margaret Mitchell’s novel. In fact, the novel’s timeframe means that Scarlett’s dealings with slaves happen away from the plantation during the war, and when she returns to Tara afterwards her interactions are with the newly emancipated slaves. She is not technically a mistress at all because she is a daughter, not the mistress, of a plantation before the Civil War and she does not abide by the codes of behaviour that dictated the lives of women of her class. Moreover, Scarlett can be seen more as a symbolic icon of an idealised South, her fortunes mirroring those of the region. Nevertheless, Scarlett’s literary legacy is an abiding one, creating the impression of the antebellum mistress as a cosseted and genteel coquette, who is simultaneously wilful. The popularity of the novel and the film has assured Scarlett’s cultural afterlife. The novel has enjoyed enormous commercial success and popularity since its initial publication, including Margaret Mitchell winning the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1937. The novel sold a million copies in the first six months after publication and subsequently more than twenty five million copies in twenty seven languages. The film version of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), directed by David O. Selznick and starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, won thirteen Academy Award nominations and eight awards, and was a huge box office success, grossing upwards of \$300 million. The film remains popular and the first television showing recorded viewing audiences of 110 million. There are three notable sequels to the novel; Alexandra Ripley’s *Scarlett* (1991), sanctioned by the Mitchell estate, and the subsequent television mini-series pick up the story in the Reconstruction era, yet rather fancifully, Ripley moves the action to Ireland. Donald McCaig’s, *Rhett Butler’s People* (2007), also approved by the Mitchell estate, covers the same time period as *Gone with the Wind*, extending somewhat beyond the final chapter of Mitchell’s novel to posit reconciliation between Rhett Butler and Scarlett. Both are authorised sequels, but in 2001 Mitchell’s estate took legal action to prevent the publication of a third so-called sequel, Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). This novel was styled a literary parody by Randall’s legal counsel, to evade the charge of plagiarism. Randall’s novel offers a first person critique of *Gone with the Wind*, by introducing the character of

the mid-1960s that the genre of retrospective fiction about slavery expanded. Linked to the Civil Rights movement, African American writers in particular began to see how they could effect change and make history and this arguably led them to reconsider history and try to re-evaluate their own past. Family sagas based on writers' research into their own ancestral pasts dominated this phase of writing, notably Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and Alex Hayley's *Roots* (1970), the adaptation of the latter becoming a major television phenomenon in the mid-1970s. These historical epics tend to privilege 'the question of how one reconciles an oppressive past' and emphasise resistance and power.¹⁶ In this sense, novels such as *Jubilee* and *Roots* can be thought of as part of a project that still persists in recent novels such as Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* (2001) and Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003): that of re-appropriating the African American past by confronting slavery as legacy.¹⁷

Nonetheless, confronting slavery remains a fraught proposition for American writers. White novelist Jane Smiley, for example, describes writing about race as 'the nuclear bomb of American literature,' but one which she feels writers have to be prepared to 'seize.'¹⁸ Whilst the family saga has not disappeared, the genre of retrospective fiction about slavery has expanded to

Cynara, the daughter of Gerald O'Hara and Mammy, and the mistress of Rhett. The mordant prose of the unauthorised sequel contributes to the continued controversy surrounding *Gone with the Wind* in literary and cultural studies. The debate concerns much more than whether or not Scarlett is a fair representative of the plantation white mistress, but it is beyond the remit of this thesis. For more on debates about the representation of slavery in *Gone with the Wind* see James Boatwright, 'Reconsideration: Totin' de Weary Load', in *Gone with The Wind as Book and Film*, ed. by Richard Harwell (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), pp.211-217 and Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: Gone with the Wind and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989), pp.210-31.

¹⁶ Rushdy, p.91.

¹⁷ *Jubilee* is based on extensive research into the author's great-grandmother on whom the main character, Vyry, is based and takes place in Georgia, covering a period from the antebellum years to after Restoration. *Roots* follows the family history of Alex Hayley from the capture of his ancestor Kunta Kinte in Africa; and the sequels of the novel bring the action up to the end of the Civil Rights era. *Cane River* is another family saga. The novel is set on a plantation in Louisiana, and follows the lives of four generations of black women in the writer's family. The sequel *Red River* (2004) continues the story of Tademy's family until 70 years after the end of the Civil War. *The Known World* is set in Virginia and also offers a generational saga.

¹⁸ Jane Smiley's comments were recorded for the Mark Lawson series *Capturing America* on Radio Four, 25th February 2010. Smiley's novel *The All-True travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton* (1998) is set in Kansas Territory between 1850 and 1852. The eponymous heroine becomes a reluctant abolitionist.

include texts that are neither first person narratives nor straightforward chronological histories. I concur with Maryemma Graham, who thinks of retrospective novels in the African American tradition as ‘part of a larger process of cultural revisionism, of re-defining history and historical memory, and of confronting the past in innovative and provocative ways that are intentionally self-reflexive.’¹⁹ This largely revisionist phase of publications began in the late 1970s with Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), a time-travel novel that records its fictional heroine’s visits to antebellum Maryland. It includes works that Rushdy, for example, describes as ‘ambiguously first person,’ and which I agree can be described as ‘suspicious of the coherent subject of narration, and inviting of others’ voices.’²⁰ Indeed retrospective narratives of slavery are my concern precisely because they open up the story to new voices, including that of the white mistress; and it is this particular confrontation that engages me most here.

It is crucial to acknowledge the impossibility of ever regaining a comprehensive understanding of the past through fiction. This is reminiscent of the dilemma facing writers and artists focusing on the Holocaust who are the children and grandchildren of survivors rather than actual survivors. James E. Young argues compellingly that the artists of what he styles ‘after-images’ draw attention to their ‘vicarious relationship to events’ to ensure that their “post-memory” of these events remains an unfinished, ephemeral process, not a means toward definitive answers to impossible questions.’²¹ In the sense of definitive answers, Deborah McDowell is deliberately provocative when she wonders if the proliferation of literature about slavery might be ‘simply because contemporary writers can “witness” slavery from the “safe” vantage point of distance?’ and when she asks ‘is the retelling meant to attempt the impossible: to “get it right,” to “set the record straight?”’²² The process of returning to slavery retrospectively

¹⁹ Maryemma Graham, ‘Introduction’ to *The African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.1-13 (p.5).

²⁰ Rushdy, p.99.

²¹ James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p.2.

²² Deborah McDowell, ‘Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom - Dessa Rose’, in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell and

attempts at least to face these tensions. My work follows Graham's claim that such accounts of slavery enter the territory of history to become a kind of 'arbiter of memory,' and my thesis explores how this arbitration has contributed not so much to recreating a comprehensive portrait of the white mistress, but to redressing the balance of critical discussion to include further interrogation of this character, so that her place within the history of slavery is better understood. As aforementioned, I set about this by exploring three specific novels that foreground the role of the white mistress by making her a key protagonist.²³

Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) draws on the writer's contemporary memories of slavery's past. Owing to the defeat of the Confederacy in the American Civil War, the period in which this novel was written is characterised by a sense of loss concerning the Southern values and ideals which I proceed to explore. In many ways the novel typifies the 'Lost Cause' mentality of Southern sentiments in the era immediately following the Great Depression of the 1930s and so an ambiguous attitude towards slavery and the white mistress is discernible.²⁴ I explore *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, the first novel since Cather's to offer a white mistress character as a main protagonist. This novel is written after the Civil Rights era and not only condemns slavery outright, but also offers a reconsideration of the possibility of closer alliances between black and white women in an innovative manner. I explore *Property* (2003) by Valerie Martin, the first American novel to present a first-person narrative from the perspective of a white mistress. Written during a period in which the United States Senate was involved in a decade of debate about whether or not to issue a public apology for American slavery, this novel offers a re-evaluation

Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.144-163 (p.144).

²³ Graham, p.9.

²⁴ For more on 'Lost Cause' sentiments see Richard Gray, 'Writing Southern Cultures', in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp.3-26 (pp.9-11), and Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War', in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. by Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.171-99.

of the white woman's culpability but also re-appraises the psychological damage that slavery inflicts upon the perpetrator. As such, it responds to the contemporary moment regarding slavery—not so much one of retribution but one of reconciliation through understanding.

In this thesis I provide a comprehensive understanding of the presentation of the antebellum white mistress in retrospective fiction about slavery, drawing upon historical as well as literary sources, by examining in turn her relationship with her female slaves, her family and her plantation home. I consider the background by placing the white mistress in her historical context. I then explore how this context applies to the presentation of the white mistress as she is enshrined in the highly influential nineteenth-century novel about slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe.²⁵ The fictional output that follows this novel tends to respond either directly or implicitly to the legacy of Stowe's work and its historical resonances. Through setting the scene in my introduction and through my examination of the novels in the three chapters of the thesis, I investigate how the differing moments in the production of fiction about slavery from the nineteenth century to the opening decades of the twenty-first century have contributed to the shifting perception of the antebellum white mistress.

Uncovering the Historical White Mistress: The Cult of True Womanhood

The period preceding the American Civil War was one of enormous privilege for women of high social status in the Southern states of America. Such women have come to be characterised by the figure of the Southern belle, cosseted and adored. She is pictured in popular perception as pale skinned,

²⁵ Not only was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a publishing phenomenon, selling one hundred thousand volumes in eight weeks, it gave rise to hundreds of dramatic adaptations and huge critical debate. Just after its publication fourteen pro-slavery novels appeared; the most famous being Mary Henderson Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin, or, Southern Life as it is* (1852). For more on the cultural and critical afterlife of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Henry Louis Gates, 'Introduction' to *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. xxxi-xlvii.

with a delicate constitution, wearing fine crinolines and living a life of indulgent luxury, her leisure being assured by the labour of slaves. In recent decades, however, historians including Anne Firor Scott, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Catherine Clinton, Sally McMillen and Marli Weiner have uncovered a wealth of source material to reappraise the antebellum plantation mistress who had remained somewhat obscure until the 1980s, or at best 'overlaid by romantic mythologizing', as in the figuration described above.²⁶ Consequently, much more is known about the quotidian lives of women in the antebellum South and the ways in which their experiences differed from those of women living in the Northern states of America. In this section I outline the code of conduct as it applied to antebellum Southern women.

The strictures demanded by the prevailing code that determined female behaviour came to be known as the cult of true womanhood, a term coined by historian and critic Barbara Welter. These expectations combined to erect a powerful ideal of femininity that applied to white women of the planter class and extended to encompass all white women with social aspirations. This ideal was communicated to women through their own mothers, in their formal education, in their religious instruction, their reading and in their dealings with the opposite sex.²⁷ The ideal of womanhood as it applies here is best explained by Welter in the following often-cited summary:

Four virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.²⁸

²⁶ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p.6.

²⁷ For more on southern women's education see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.79-100 and Jane Ann Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1981), pp.3-6.

²⁸ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1976), p. 21.

Happiness and power for white women were most closely associated with attaining the status of a lady. To be a gentleman was perceived as the highest and worthiest condition for a man and, according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'the ideal of the lady constituted the highest condition to which women could aspire': this concept of 'lady' is what Welter means here by 'woman.'²⁹ For a woman to be perceived as a lady, she had to embody these established virtues. The identity of white Southern women and their self-image, then, were predicated upon their ability to conform to the social mores of their day, specifically as they applied to the four virtues that make up the cult of true womanhood.

The first two precepts of piety and purity complement each other and I consider them in tandem. Christian doctrine was invoked to endorse the value of sexual purity. The woman who gave up her chastity by succumbing to seduction or through her own license was seen as beyond redemption. She could not be received into what was considered good company and her exile from society was compounded by the fact that she was rendered unmarriageable. In some respects, this was seen as worse than death, and poverty and ignominy could be the material results of sexual indiscretion. Purity offered respect to the white woman of the planter class, and accompanied by the duty to produce heirs, this contributed to an ideal of femininity. The ideal of purity was also aligned with the concept of honour. Fox-Genovese explains how white women's behaviour was closely monitored because it reflected on the status of their families:

A young woman's purity merged with her racial and class status; her own honour merged with that of her kin, especially her male kin; and her behaviour reflected upon the reputation of the other members of her family, household and class.³⁰

Chastity was highly prized as a Christian virtue, and being perceived as a good Christian in turn enhanced the status of women in their families and communities.

²⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p.203.

³⁰ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.225.

Moreover, Christianity supplied more than sexual prescriptions; it was considered an inviolable part of the life of white women in many contexts. The Bible was prescribed reading for all children but remained a key source of intellectual engagement for women throughout their lives. Women were not so much engaged in hermeneutics as in seeking Biblical perspectives on moral issues. This was because women in the South were expected to perform the role of moral guardian in their families and wider communities.³¹ This was seen as a sacred endeavour and one best fitted to women, with their superior moral sense. Women were faced with the expectation that they ought to protect men from their impulses and, as Welter expresses it, '[m]en could be counted on to be grateful when women thus saved them from themselves.' Welter draws a helpful biblical allusion, explaining that by embracing purity on both her own behalf and that of her husband, the Southern wife and mother was expected to be 'another, better Eve.'³² Although the notion of women as morally superior to men and the emphasis on sexual purity was not confined to the Southern states, as these precepts were expected from women throughout the United States in the nineteenth century, the conditions of slavery allowed the double standards to be more forcefully felt in the South. Furthermore, this perception of white women allowed greater license for Southern men whilst creating concomitant challenges for Southern women.

Double standards prevailed in many aspects of life. Men occupied all of the positions of authority within the church and were expected to conform to Christian standards of behaviour, but it was at least tacitly understood that excessive drinking and often gambling were normal masculine pursuits in the South, and, as Catherine Clinton asserts, 'plantation culture maintained an extremely high tolerance for these vices in men.' She develops the point to examine this lenience towards men, explaining that 'many plantation mistresses saw sin in terms of increment; they were prepared to

³¹ For more on the perceived moral superiority of women and its implications see Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp.173-95.

³² Welter, p.25; p.22.

cope with small trespasses, yet ever fearful of the uncontrollable momentum of immorality.’³³

Moreover, unlike the dual demands of piety and purity placed upon women, men were not constrained by expectations of moral conduct in relation to sexuality when that concerned sexual congress with enslaved women. Research suggests that as many as ten per cent of the Southern population by the time of the Civil War consisted of mulattos, or people of mixed black and white parentage.³⁴ Whilst this behaviour was never openly condoned, it was widespread. That their husbands and sons fathered children and even enjoyed emotional relationships in some cases with black women on the plantation was a source of much chagrin, and sometimes deep despair, for white women, but the patriarchal order of the South did not allow women to challenge moral laxity in their men openly, and this too was tacitly accepted as an inevitable part of plantation life. So it was that the white master of a Southern plantation held the authority but without the restrictions placed upon the white mistress.

Few diaries referred directly to women’s attitudes towards the sexual double standards that resulted in miscegenation. The following passage from Mary Chesnut’s *A Diary from Dixie*, written between 1860 and 1865, in which this particular Southern mistress outlines the extent of the transgression, is often quoted:

God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and iniquity. Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everyone’s household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.³⁵

Chesnut’s sardonic tone here is telling, suggesting that women, in her acquaintance at least, did not rail openly about the sins of their own men-folk in this regard, although she also reveals a lack of understanding of what

³³ Clinton, p.105.

³⁴ Sally McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1992), p.22.

³⁵ Mary Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1997), p.114.

miscegenation must have meant for the more immediate victims of such liaisons—the enslaved women on whom it was practised—when she proceeds to describe ‘a magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife, and his beautiful and accomplished daughters.’³⁶ Yet Chesnut’s bitterness evinces the tension contributed by the freedom afforded to men to use their interpretation of scripture to wield authority over the people in their household while women had to adhere to strict standards of purity, adopting the moral precepts of the Bible dogmatically.

Not only were piety and purity expected as female attributes, religion was also expected to provide solace for women; it afforded justification, if not consolation, for the high rates of mortality and loss that were an unavoidable aspect of life.³⁷ People in the South, no matter their social class, faced higher possibility of illness in the form of malaria, cholera and other ailments to those who lived in Northern states. There were cholera epidemics in Louisiana, for example, in 1832, 1849 and 1853 and many women in Southern states recorded annual bouts of malaria affecting almost everyone on the plantation and contributing to high instances of miscarriage.³⁸ Women were also afflicted by complications in child birth, including puerperal disease, an infection incurred through poor hygiene on the part of doctors, as well as the possibility of losing a child. Although mortality rates for children were high in the United States as a whole, Sally McMillen uses census statistics to conclude that it was not unusual for Southern families to suffer the death of several children. McMillen gives the infant mortality rate from the 1850 federal census, which reveals the death-rate in Southern states among those under one year of age in the white population to be 17% and under five years of age as 38%.³⁹ To address this in part, piety was invoked to offer spiritual explanations for the vicissitudes of life.

³⁶ Chesnut, p.115.

³⁷ See McMillen, *Southern Women*, pp.48-66.

³⁸ McMillen, *Southern Women*, p.53.

³⁹ Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p.67.

Submissiveness and domesticity can be explored as another pair of linked virtues demanded of antebellum women, because Southern conventions of Christianity did not only enshrine the virtues of piety and purity. According to Anne Firor Scott, 'the image of the submissive woman was reinforced by evangelical theology.'⁴⁰ Examples of such theological arguments include essays on the proper relation between the sexes produced by Thomas Dew in 1831 and a treatise reminding women of the importance of Saint Paul's precept in the Bible that wives ought to submit to their husbands, published by Daniel Hundley in 1860.⁴¹ That men were dominant in society was largely unquestioned. Indeed, Fox-Genovese is unequivocal in her assertion that 'at all levels, Southern culture reflected and reinforced a view of the world in which women were idealised by, but subordinate to, men.'⁴² Viewing submissiveness and domesticity as virtues allowed that white women were honoured and protected by men, but in return they had to submit to male authority in all political and fiscal matters, whilst adopting responsibility for the domestic arena.

Also unequivocal is that the home was the primary female domain: Fox-Genovese offers a valuable summary, explaining that

[t]he bourgeois ideology of domesticity propounded the radical separation of public and private spheres and the unswerving identification of men with the former and women with the latter. It further insisted upon women's primary identity as wives and mothers under the protection and domination of their husbands.⁴³

Women were venerated within the domestic setting. Firor Scott further establishes that whilst the idealisation of women is not exclusive to Southern states in the antebellum era, it is particularly fervent in the writings of Southern diarists and in the journalism of the time. In particular, she identifies the connection between the 'myth of the lady' and 'medieval

⁴⁰ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady from Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p.7.

⁴¹ For more on Thomas Roderick Dew see *The Ideology of Slavery: Pro-slavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, ed. by Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, (1981), pp.21-77. Also see Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: H. B. Price, 1860).

⁴² Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.195.

⁴³ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.61.

chivalry,' which justified a notion of placing white women on a pedestal, akin to the heroines of chivalric romance.⁴⁴ This also coincides with chivalric attitudes towards dynasty that were favoured in the antebellum South. Clinton offers a convincing overview:

As the South expanded its hierarchical social system, gender roles became even more rigid. The function of the dynasty was to merge social and political systems within an economic unit: the family. Wealth, power and status derived from this source. The family was not merely a mirror or microcosm of society, but an instrument; the home provided a training ground for the culture, as a whole, and the favoured status of males was generated as well as reinforced by domestic roles.⁴⁵

Hence domesticity and submissiveness were part of a bargain, whereby women could be held in high regard but only if they accepted that they were quintessentially inferior to men.

Again submissiveness and domesticity can be seen acting in parallel. The home environment and the family did act as training grounds for accepting patriarchal norms and were certainly the centre of the wider social system in the South, but the family and the home were simultaneously the focal points of the Southern woman's life. Those women who did not marry and have children of their own were expected to put their extended family's needs before their own, and married women privileged family over everything else. Childcare may have been delegated in part to slave women, but plantation mistresses were held responsible for the well-being of all members of the household, black and white. This necessitated the supervision not only of rations and clothing but also the entire burden of comfort and health care on the plantation. Women cut patterns and helped make most of the clothes and bedding and other soft furnishings, but they also devoted much time to nursing the ill. These joint responsibilities for physical welfare imposed significant burdens on the time of white women.

While the white plantation mistress certainly had privileges, she also had responsibilities. Worse, perhaps, than being in charge of the household itinerary and menu, the white mistress found herself responsible for

⁴⁴ Firor Scott, pp.10-14; p.15.

⁴⁵ Clinton, p.46.

domestic slaves on most plantations. As the master's representative in the home environment, the plantation mistress had the heavy duty of training, supervising and disciplining house servants. This role was assumed immediately on becoming a plantation mistress and there are many records of the difficulty posed for young women because of the gap between a wife's knowledge and experience and that of the enslaved people who were nominally under her authority.⁴⁶ Her husband's position may well have offered a white mistress the protection of his authority, but it did not mean that the slaves with whom she was in daily contact were obliged to respect her in her own right. Historians as well as writers of slave narratives have recorded examples of conflicts between white mistresses and slave women that could erupt into violence, notwithstanding the everyday challenges and difficulties that such tensions posed.⁴⁷ Exhaustive demands on her time and the fact that large plantations often meant geographical isolation, led to a full schedule for the white woman, with little time for social interaction with others of her class beyond her own kin. Clinton uses the language of subordination to suggest that the white mistress was also enslaved:

In ante-bellum society, the power of Southern slaveholders rendered tyranny just. And that power ensured that a woman remained as securely bound to the land as her husband's other property: shackled, however enshrined, and melancholy, however maintained.⁴⁸

Indeed, this presumes that a white plantation mistress's responsibilities were prohibitive.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that while the constraints imposed on the antebellum mistress may have constituted intellectual and emotional bondage that belied her privileged position, this did not amount to physical slavery. While limitations were placed on white Southern women, it is important not to conflate these codes with the literal enslavement of black

⁴⁶ For more on the challenges for plantation mistresses posed by supervising slaves see McMillen, *Southern Women*, pp.119-24.

⁴⁷ For examples of conflicts between mistresses and slaves recorded in slave narratives see Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four years in the White House* (1868) (New York: Arno, 1968), pp.35-9 and Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp.28-33.

⁴⁸ Clinton, p.179.

Southern women because in every material sense the position of white mistress and black slave woman significantly differed. Frances Smith Foster argues that the study of antebellum women's personal narratives has been limited by focussing on the strictures dictating their behaviour, with scholars frequently suggesting that the 'auction block' and the 'pedestal' are similar in form and function.⁴⁹ She notes that the personal narratives of many nineteenth-century white women contribute to this tendency, because white women, especially in the South, often compared their situations to slavery.⁵⁰ Fox-Genovese also urges caution in her appraisal of the plantation mistress:

Life would be easier if we could dismiss them as oppressive tyrants or exonerate them as themselves victims of an oppressive system. We cannot. By class and race, they were highly privileged ladies who revelled in their privilege, but many were warm and attractive women, and by their own lights and the standards of their society, God-fearing, decent women. They were women who owned—whose husbands, fathers and sons—owned slaves in a world that increasingly recognized slavery as a moral evil and a political danger.⁵¹

It would be unhelpful simply to demonise or attempt to exculpate fully the white women to whom Fox-Genovese refers and this is reflected in the depiction of their literary counterparts. Slavery affected all of the prescriptions and codes of behaviour precisely because different expectations were placed on white and black Southern plantation women, and this is something I explore in the first chapter of my thesis.

In all these contexts white women seem to have accepted their lot as there is little evidence in extant writings of complaints against the patriarchal code in and of itself. Although they may have been dissatisfied with aspects of their lives, what we know of the white mistress shows her to be characterised by her stoicism. Susana Rowson pictures the ideal woman

⁴⁹ For more on the female slave experience of the auction block see Joy Jordan-Lake, *Whitewashing Uncle Tom's Cabin: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists Respond to Stowe* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), pp.20-22. For more on the white woman's experience of being idolised see Firor Scott, pp.4-21.

⁵⁰ Frances Smith Foster, 'Adding Colour and Contour to Early American Self-Portraits', in *Conjuring Black Women, Fiction, and the Literary Tradition*, ed. by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp.26-27.

⁵¹ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.35.

for her readers in *Charlotte Temple*, one of the most popular novels during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁵²

Behold the meekness of her countenance, the modesty of her gait; her handmaids are Humility, Filial Piety, Conjugal Affection, Industry and Benevolence. Her name is Content.....Her parent is Religion; her sisters, Patience and Hope.⁵³

Whilst it must have been impossible to embody this ideal entirely, it is evident that white women of this period strove to fulfil their society's expectations. Indeed, it is clear that in attempting to enact the tenets of the cult of true womanhood as moral guardian and religious role model, as chaste maiden to loyal wife and devoted mother and as skilled housekeeper and biddable helpmeet, the white plantation mistress of the antebellum South was much more complex than the decorative belle of imagination. Unsurprisingly, the retrospective fiction about slavery that I consider in this thesis does much to challenge and unsettle any ready acceptance of the so-called cult of true womanhood. Nonetheless, the four virtues considered here—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity—combine to form a complete value system of behaviour and this system underpins the characterisation of white women in nineteenth-century fiction about slavery, the fiction that informs later writers.

The White Mistress in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Establishing 'Types' of White Mistress

Harriet Beecher Stowe's abolitionist polemic, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, remains among the best-selling fiction in America and best exemplifies the literary representation of the white mistress in her contemporary setting.⁵⁴ The novel does not present a single, comprehensive image of the white mistress,

⁵² For more on the popularity of the novel see Ann Douglas, 'Introduction' to Susana Rowson, *Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.vii-xvi (pp.xii-xiv).

⁵³ Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* p.32.

⁵⁴ For more on the unprecedented publishing phenomenon of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Debra J. Rosenthal, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp.29-30, and Charles Dudley Warner, 'The Story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*', in *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. by Elizabeth Ammons (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K Hall, 1980), pp.64-5.

but explores different manifestations of the role. The nineteenth-century white mistresses in Stowe's novel are shown responding to the cult of true womanhood as part of their direct experience. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers three key portrayals of the role of white mistress: Emily Shelby, the sympathetic, yet ineffectual mistress, who embodies her society's expectations; Marie St Clare, a woman who comes to exemplify much of what is most contemptible about being a mistress of slaves; and Ophelia St Clare, a Northerner who comes to reside on the St Clare Plantation and becomes a mistress by default. Because of Stowe's avowed abolitionist agenda, the novel is naturally at pains to condemn slavery, yet the mistresses are not wholly vilified, providing a broader consideration of the complex relationship between slavery and the white mistress character.

Stowe wrote the best-selling American novel of all time prompted by three events: the 'bitter sorrow' occasioned by the death of her beloved one-year-old son in 1849, her disgust at the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the behest of her sister in law.⁵⁵ Through its portrayal of the main mistress characters, the novel cements the idealised image of the true woman as pure, pious and firmly enshrined within the domestic sphere.⁵⁶ Her portrayal is sympathetic in the case of Emily Selby, who embodies these accepted feminine virtues, and unsympathetic in the case of her antithesis Marie St Clare, who at best approximates the ideal of a true woman. However, despite the domestic being presented as a utopian arena of matriarchal harmony in the world of the novel, the submission of the white mistress to her husband's will undercuts the realisation of a perfect world under the auspices of women's moral superiority. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the realities of patriarchal power trump feminine sensitivity and Christian virtues. Overall, the white female characters of the kindly mistress Mrs

⁵⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, 'Letter to Eliza Cabot Follen, 1852', in, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1994), p.413.

⁵⁶ For an argument in favour of the political significance of the domestic in fiction see Jane Tompkins, 'Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History', in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.122-46, and for a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a critique on domesticity see Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp.13-38.

Shelby and others, including the Northern senator's wife Mrs Bird and, to an extent, the wholly sympathetic Quaker heroine Rachel Halliday, are presented as well-meaning in their attempts to alleviate the suffering of slaves, yet never fully independent as they are also subject to male authority. Only the cruel mistress Marie St Clare has any real power to act and yet that is because when she is widowed she sells her husband's former slaves and so conforms to the system, never attempting to undermine the status quo.

Furthermore, none of the novel's white mistresses are exonerated from owning slaves in the first place. Stowe uses these white women to examine different manifestations of slavery, presenting her readers with a model response to slavery in the form of Rachel Halliday, who, in rejecting slavery altogether, can be seen as a truly Christian advocate for slaves. Hence part of Stowe's message to her white female readers is embodied in the guilt and responsibility apportioned to her white female characters, and this can be seen at its most complex in the characterisation and function of Ophelia St Clare. Augustine St Clare's cousin is a Northerner and is philosophically opposed to slavery, yet by accepting the 'gift' of the young slave girl Topsy, she becomes a mistress, albeit reluctantly. Not only does the novel record Ophelia's attitudes to slavery, it also confronts her racist views and sets her abhorrence of 'Negroes' in opposition to the kind of Christianity Stowe advocates. Northern white women are asked to identify with Ophelia, their compatriot, and hence to confront their own prejudices. In this, Ophelia comes to represent the ideal subject position of the novel and so is central to an understanding of how the white mistress character operates in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I explore in turn the characterisation of Emily Shelby, Marie St Clare and Ophelia St Clare, to consider their influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptualisations of the white mistress in literature.

Josephine Donovan helpfully identifies Stowe's characters as operating within the conventions of Menippean satire; this means that they act as representative types, and is no less applicable to the white women in the novel than any of the other characters who are placed in parallel or

opposition to one another. What this leads to is a reification of the characters: Mrs Shelby is essentially good and Mrs St Clare is essentially wicked, according to this schematic.⁵⁷ In her book *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a collection of factual documents and supporting texts published in 1853 to complement the novel, Stowe freely acknowledges that they represent 'types' of contemporary women. She explains that '[i]t was the design of the writer, in delineating the domestic arrangements of Mr and Mrs Shelby, to show a picture of the fairest side of slave-life.' If Emily Shelby's establishment is intended to illustrate 'the most favourable representation of slavery which could obtain', then, conversely, Marie St Clare, in her home setting, represents the archetypal cruel, dismissive mistress.⁵⁸

Marie St Clare also suggests the idleness and luxury associated with those whose leisure is purchased on the labour of slaves. Stowe adds a caveat regarding her least attractive female character, admitting that she is not representative of rich Southern women *per se*, but she attests that Marie's type of indolence is all the more dangerous in the South, precisely because the institution of slavery gives license to her selfishness and cruelty. Stowe also voices her scepticism of the view of beneficent slavery, often offered as a justification for the South's peculiar institution, by referring to the home of Marie St Clare. She remarks: '[i]t is often supposed that domestic servitude in slave states is a kind of paradise; that house-servants are invariably pets; that young mistresses are always fond of their "mammies," and young masters always handsome, good-natured and indulgent.'⁵⁹ The novel explodes this myth, because if even the kindly regime on the Shelby plantation gives the lie to this image, then the St Clare plantation further belies the description, and it is in the presentation of

⁵⁷ Josephine Donovan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Evil, Affliction and Redemptive Love* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), p.49.

⁵⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Seattle, Washington: Inkling Books Facsimile, 2005), p.8.

⁵⁹ Stowe, *A Key*, p.34.

these two different types of plantation that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* considers more than one 'type' of white mistress.⁶⁰

Whilst the novel condemns slave-owning, the women's role in the institution is mediated somewhat by the fact that they are subject to male authority. The incident that introduces Emily Shelby demonstrates that she may be virtuous but she is powerless to intervene in the masculine world of commerce. The decision to sell Tom to the slave dealer Haley rests with Mr Shelby, as does the authority to sign the legal paperwork finalising the sale, despite Mrs Shelby's distress. Shelby claims that it is 'only necessity' that is making him consider the sale: the fact that he is in debt. His wife claims that there can be no legitimate reason to part with their 'people.'⁶¹ However, in spite of Mrs Shelby's objections, the novel extends the concept of ownership to include her: Shelby declares to Haley that in the case of Eliza, '[his] wife would not part with her for her weight in gold.' In fact, when she tries to reassure Eliza she uses language that makes her position as superior and mistress unambiguous. She calls her slave 'you foolish girl' and adds, condescendingly, 'you know your master never deals with those Southern traders, and never means to sell any of his servants as long as they behave well.' Emily Shelby is described as 'a woman of high class, both intellectually and morally,' and she displays 'high moral and religious sensibility and principle, carried out with great energy and ability into practical results.'⁶² Nevertheless, her high principles cannot change the course of her husband's actions, her impotence in financial matters making her representative of white women of her class and time.

Arthur Shelby breaks his promise to his wife not to deal with traders, as well as his promise to Tom to give him his freedom, because he has the power to make the final decision, a power encapsulated by his simple

⁶⁰ A third plantation appears in the novel, that belonging to Simon Legree, and it demonstrates the worst conditions for slaves, but it is not discussed here because there are no white women in residence. See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), pp.317-90. Further references to the primary text of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will be taken from this edition.

⁶¹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.4.

⁶² Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.5; p.6; p.11.

confirmation of Emily Shelby's fears: 'it is so.' She offers to share the 'inconvenience' of any monetary sacrifice, but is powerless to intervene when her husband points out that the choice is between selling two of their slaves or selling all of them and ending up 'selling everything.'⁶³ Emily Shelby's declaration that slavery is 'a bitter, bitter most accursed thing—a curse to the master, and a curse to the slave,' is accompanied by her eventual acceptance of the sale as a 'cruel necessity,' undercutting her noble sentiment.⁶⁴ Her lack of power is further highlighted when she tries to persuade her husband to expedite the process by which they will redeem Tom, by executing a plan with Tom's wife Chloe that would mean economising with the family's budget. Shelby refuses and will not discuss finances with her at all because she is a woman, despite the fact that she has 'a clean energetic, practical mind, and a force of character every way superior to that of her husband.'⁶⁵ Later, Emily Shelby is certainly instrumental in securing an ultimate moral victory in persuading her son George to emancipate the slaves, and this reflects on the ideal female role of exerting strong moral influence on her children. But of course it also reinforces the rule of patriarchy in that only a son has the authority to act: ultimately, it is George Shelby who knocks Legree to the ground and makes his former slaves 'free men and free women.'⁶⁶ The fact remains that in the world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* women have to wait for the men they influence to act. In the case of the Shelbys it is too late for Tom, making Emily Shelby's impotence seem culturally inevitable.

Yet, *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* differing perspectives of white mistresses allows an alternative scenario to be presented on the St Clare plantation. And in moving away from the Shelbys to the St Clares, the novel shifts its focus from the aforementioned 'fairest' to arguably the least fair female

⁶³ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.32; p.33.

⁶⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.34. For more on Stowe's association of feeling with the feminine see Elizabeth Fekete Trubey, 'Success is Sympathy: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Woman Reader', in *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present*, ed. by Janet Badia and Jennifer Phegley (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp.53-76.

⁶⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.235.

⁶⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.406.

influence.⁶⁷ Here, the markedly sensitive Augustine St Clare does not act under the influence of his conscience; instead he fails to put a check on the pernicious influence of his wife, Marie. Marie St Clare is not her husband's first choice of wife, but she is initially described as a woman recognised as 'the reigning belle of the season.' She is chosen by Augustine to soothe his wounded pride when he is thwarted in love, but her desire is not to comfort her husband but to ensure her own comforts. Her 'fine figure', 'splendid eyes' and 'hundred thousand dollars' offer little solace to her broken hearted husband. Marie St Clare is mockingly called a 'sultana', characterised by 'a most intense and unconscious selfishness; a selfishness the more hopeless from its quiet obtuseness, its utter ignorance of any claims but her own.' Initially she feigns illness, but her inertia means that ultimately Marie St Clare declines from a 'blooming belle' into 'a yellow, faded, sickly woman, whose time was divided among a variety of fanciful diseases, and who considered herself, in every sense, the most ill-used and suffering person in existence.'⁶⁸

The irony of her self-opinion is clear in that it is her daughter, the consumptive Little Eva, who suffers genuine illness and her slaves who experience genuine ill-use at her hands.⁶⁹ Even though the fact that Marie St Clare is indulged by her husband and her slaves suggests she may be said to have more power, her home is seen as inferior to that of the Sheldons because hers is not a moral influence. In the world of the novel, the world of true womanhood, the necessity of moral influence rests upon women, particularly mothers. Marie acts more like a child than a mother; she wishes her needs to be privileged and demands that all those who surround her indulge her whims. She does not impose a moral influence on others. Instead, here it is the child who exerts spiritual influence. Little Eva's final words sum up the theme of love and redemption that is at the heart of Stowe's manifesto in the novel. She cries out "Oh! Love, —joy, —peace!",

⁶⁷ Stowe, *A Key*, p.8.

⁶⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.134; p.144; p.145.

⁶⁹ For an appraisal of Little Eva's character see Elizabeth Ammons, 'Heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*', *American Literature*, 49 (1977), 158-170.

hence she extols the Christian virtues that her mother so obviously lacks and highlights the failings of Marie's influence on the St Clare plantation.

Not only is Marie St Clare the antithesis of the ideal of true womanhood, but she is also a tyrant. Elizabeth Ammons considers her in counterpoint with her husband to highlight this:

If Eva's father is admirable in direct proportion to the extent of his womanishness (his inclination to follow the dictates of his heart rather than his head), Eva's mother is abominable because she will not think and feel like a mother. She behaves instead, in the terms of this novel, like a man: ruthless, greedy, self-centred. And she is a monster.⁷⁰

I concur with Ammons that this portrait of a white mistress is abominable in the context of nineteenth-century expectations. Furthermore it is more than selfishness that characterises Marie and makes her the 'monster' Ammons identifies: she is certainly a cruel woman. Her attitude to the slaves is that they ought to be regularly 'thoroughly whipped,' foreshadowing the fate of the St Clare slaves after Augustine St Clare's untimely death. The chapter heading 'The Unprotected' signals the vulnerability of the slaves who find themselves left to the capricious will of Marie St Clare. Moreover, it can be argued that Marie St Clare's cruelty is an extension of her solipsism, rather than straightforward sadism: she sees any infraction of her rules as a direct assault on her own comfort and this is what she desires to impede through punishment. Marie's tyranny is most clearly depicted in her decision to sell all of the slaves; indeed, her decision opens one of the most damning chapters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 'The Slave Warehouse', wherein Stowe offers one of her strongest criticisms of slavery. In Jean Fagan Yellin's words, 'Marie St Clare dramatises that women, too, can be immoral' in this ultimate act of callous betrayal.⁷¹ Marie St Clare, then, is presented as the worst type of slave mistress and the worst kind of white woman because her indolence

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Ammons, 'Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Saviour: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and American Women Writers Before the 1920's', in *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.155-95 (p.165).

⁷¹ Jean Fagan Yellin, 'Doing it Herself: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Woman's Role in the Slavery Crisis', in *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.85-106 (p.92).

and tyranny mean she does not conform to the gendered expectations of her society.

Aside from the diametrically opposed mistresses presented by Emily Shelby and Marie St Clare, as aforementioned, it is in the characterisation of Ophelia St Clare that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* posits a more promising picture of a white mistress in terms of the novel's abolitionist project. Indeed, the character of Ophelia acts as a forerunner for abolitionist women living in slave states in later fiction, notably Rachel Blake in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Ophelia is from the North, and she becomes a mistress only reluctantly when she goes to stay with her brother and is given the slave Topsy as a gift. Ophelia is first and foremost a pragmatist. Stowe writes that '[i]n her habits, she was a living impersonation of order, method and exactness' and she converts the St Clare house to 'produce a harmonious and orderly system.' She is also characterised from the outset as a woman of strong opinions: she 'thought with great strength within certain narrow limits.' On the subject of slavery, she is introduced initially as having very fixed ideas. She believes slaveholders have 'an awful responsibility', which she does not envy. In fact her views are shaped by the belief that white people have a moral responsibility to educate and reform blacks and that their 'souls' are elemental to this responsibility.⁷² This forms part of her notions of a racial hierarchy that mirror Stowe's own fixed ideas on racial types.⁷³ At first Ophelia is appalled by Eva kissing her black mammy, for example, but she does upbraid Augustine, calling it an 'abomination' for him to 'defend' the system of slavery, and embarks upon a discussion with him in which her cousin admits that he does not approve of slavery at all but continues to put it into practice because he is weak and indulgent.⁷⁴ Her outsider status justifies these discussions, meaning that Ophelia can be used to reflect on the white mistress's role from a Northern perspective.

⁷² Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.147; p.191; p.148; p.164; p.198.

⁷³ For more on Stowe's ideas on 'innate' racial characteristics see Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas, Texas: South Methodist University Press, 1985), pp.64-85, and George Fredrickson 'Uncle Tom and the Anglo-Saxons: Romantic Racialism in the North', in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1994), pp.429-438 (p.432).

⁷⁴ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.205.

More than this, Ophelia provides a model for Stowe of how her readers are expected to respond to slavery, by entering into the debate. Ophelia makes an intellectual contribution and is prepared to reconsider her ideas. For example, she tells St Clare, 'I never thought of the matter in this light' in answer to his specious argument that slaves are 'better off than a large class of the population of England.' However, her major reconsideration in the novel concerns the child Topsy. Ophelia is keen to clarify that her abolitionist's desire to legally own the child is only so that she 'may have a right to take her to the Free states and give her her liberty.' She is at first repulsed by the girl, thinking her 'odd and goblin-like' and 'heathenish' but St Clare's calculated appeal to her 'missionary' zeal is what decides the matter, and Ophelia agrees to try her hand at 'educating' Topsy.⁷⁵ She firstly ministers to her physical needs, cleaning the child and dressing her decently, but it is in Ophelia's work of moral education, modelling Stowe's attitudes, that the writer's mission is also evinced.

Ophelia is shown to learn from experience. Initially she admits to a 'feeling of repugnance' generated by black people in general and Topsy in particular. But she accepts the gift of Topsy only in so far as it will enable her to 'protect' her, and, moreover, she begs St Clare to make provision to free his slaves in the case of his death, modelling abolitionist principles in action.⁷⁶ Ophelia's awakened sensitivities lead to action and I agree with Fagan Yellin's observation that '[i]n the world of Stowe's novel, the example of Miss Ophelia appears to validate Catherine Beecher's argument that women can work effectively against slavery within the domestic circle.'⁷⁷ Ophelia St Clare is open to learning and she learns how to love from the child Eva.⁷⁸ In Stowe's ultimate assessment of the character, she admits that she does not embrace the name of abolitionist but insists that 'the true Ophelia is not afraid of a hard name in a good cause.'⁷⁹ This allows that a woman must primarily be a good moral influence and a good Christian. And

⁷⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.214; p.286; p.221; p.222.

⁷⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.287.

⁷⁷ Fagan Yellin, p.96.

⁷⁸ Stowe, *A Key*, p.30.

⁷⁹ Stowe, *A Key*, p.33.

so the characterisation of Ophelia St Clare, from an abolitionist perspective, offers not only a model of action, but an ideal type of woman.

Uncle Tom's Cabin remains an influential source when it comes to understanding how the white mistress might be represented. Not only the novel's unprecedented popularity, but also its abolitionist agenda set the tone for how slave mistresses were to be viewed. In the novel's endorsement of the virtues of 'true womanhood', despite its acknowledgement of the limitations placed on women's power because of the patriarchal structure, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be seen to crystallise a set representation of white women living in the South. Yet what it contributes is not one fixed image, but an array of possible manifestations of the role of slave mistress: in Emily Shelby the novel evokes the best possible slave owner, but despite her inherent kindness she is powerless; in Marie St Clare the novel exposes the worst possible slave owner, for despite every indulgence she is selfish and callous; and in Ophelia St Clare, the reluctant mistress, the novel reveals the ideal white mistress in the person of an abolitionist who yet has direct experience of slavery. It is this range of possibilities that means *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains a valuable source for all writers of fiction about slavery and it is this range of possibilities that writers of retrospective plantation fiction draw upon for inspiration and comment.

Thesis: Substance and Structure

In several ways the novels I focus upon respond to the representation of the white mistress in earlier fiction, not least by opening up the genre of retrospective fiction about slavery to embrace and reconsider this character. In this section I provide a contextual background to each of the novels. I do so by offering some brief publication details and plot summary and by initialising the critical discussion of the white mistress's symbolic function in the work. I will focus first on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which was the final novel written by Willa Cather.⁸⁰ First published in 1940, it is the only

⁸⁰ Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (London: Virago Press, 1986).

one of her novels to be set in her childhood home of Virginia. This particular novel attempts to navigate the difficult fact that nostalgia for the past of the South is also nostalgia for the slave past, and here many of the challenges of revisiting slavery pertain. Sapphira Colbert is a troubling character: described by Hermione Lee as ‘an unsympathetic but impressive woman whose desire for control is obstructed and so becomes distorted and malicious,’ Sapphira offers an ambiguous portrait of a slave mistress who orchestrates the rape of her slave Nancy on one hand and elicits respect and admiration of the faithful Till, Nancy’s mother, on the other.⁸¹ Indeed, the novel’s attitude towards slavery shores up a paradox of beneficent protection juxtaposed with gross tyranny. Certainly in this novel the white mistress is the central character, as signalled by the title, but what the title also foregrounds is that this is a novel about the mistress’s relationship with her slaves. I argue that Sapphira’s relationship with Nancy and Till is complex, predicated upon obsession and interdependence. But the novel also concerns itself with Sapphira’s wider relationships within her family. The action takes place in 1856, seventeen years before the writer’s birth. It imagines an incident that had become family lore, that of the escape to Canada of one of her great-grandmother’s slaves and the events surrounding it.

The novel begins with hints about the miller Henry Colbert’s closeness to the young mulatto slave, Nancy. Whilst there is no evidence in the text that he ever seriously considers a liaison with the girl, his wife Sapphira becomes jealous. Overnight Nancy goes from being a favourite of her mistress to being subjected to Sapphira’s plan to have her raped by her errant nephew, Martin. Duly Sapphira invites Martin for a prolonged visit and Nancy finds herself subject to his advances. In despair, Nancy turns to the Colberts’ daughter, Rachel Blake, for help. Rachel opposes slavery and with the tacit help of her father, who provides financial assistance, she manages to smuggle Nancy away, ultimately to make a new home in Canada. Whilst the novel does not engage with the Civil War and its effects,

⁸¹ Hermione Lee, ‘Introduction’ to Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (see Cather, above), pp.vii-xxiv (p.x).

there is disagreement about slavery within the Colbert clan. Henry Colbert is opposed to slavery in principle but he appreciates his wife's right to make decisions about her slaves' lives as 'a sacred privilege not to be abridged' and his acquiescence to Nancy's escape greatly troubles his own peace of mind.⁸² Rachel Blake, however, offers not only a contrasting parallel for her mother but, I argue, a model of what white women could become in opposing slavery altogether. The novel ends with an epilogue in which Cather inserts herself as a young girl to recount her childhood memory of the return of Nancy to her ancestral home, twenty-six years later. The story concludes in the kitchen, with the former slave Till recounting to Nancy and the young Cather tales of how much she continues to admire her late mistress, Sapphira.

The epilogue contributes to the contentious critical reception of this novel, partly because, as Sharon Hoover demonstrates, the insertion of the young grand-daughter into the story underlines an ethic of interdependence in the text.⁸³ Hoover avers that just as 'Sapphira's ongoing frame relies on those who come before her', so the story of Nancy 'is kept alive by the child.'⁸⁴ That the two stories are interdependent allows, on one hand, a tacit acknowledgement of the aforementioned redeeming power of history as story posited by D'Aguiar and others, but on the other hand, Toni Morrison argues that it is impossible to separate 'the story of a white mistress' from 'the violence entailed in the story's premise.'⁸⁵ Nevertheless, in Cather's portrait of Sapphira in relation to her slave women, her family and her Southern home, she transcends the ready echoes of the escape narratives that evoke *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to allow a response to the challenge laid down by James Baldwin in his famous critique of Stowe's novel in 1949. Baldwin

⁸² Philip L. Gerber, *Willa Cather* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p.131.

⁸³ One critic, for example, argues that because the child Cather is sick in bed she echoes the immobile Sapphira and hence the author can be identified with the slave mistress. Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p.33.

⁸⁴ Sharon Hoover, 'Authority and Community in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*', *Cather Studies Volume 3*, ed. by Susan J. Rosowski (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp.238-55 (p.243).

⁸⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p.15.

respects that the violence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be explained by Stowe's 'laudable determination' not to flinch from describing slavery, but he argues that this explanation falters if one pauses to enquire why she leaves 'unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds.' My concern here is with how the portrayal of the white mistress in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* will allow a productive foray into this territory.⁸⁶

Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose*, published in 1986, opens a space to explore the motives of perpetrators of slavery further.⁸⁷ It achieves this by creating a fictional space in which a slave woman and a white mistress meet under conditions in which the usual hierarchy no longer applies. Williams was an established poet when she embarked on her first work of prose fiction. The novel started as a short story, 'Meditations on History', for Mary Helen Washington's collection, *Midnight Birds*, in 1980. It is based on two historical incidents that Williams read about separately and drew together in her writing. The first was of a slave woman who led a revolt in Kentucky in 1829. She was convicted and hanged as a rebel, but only after the birth of the baby she had been carrying at the time: this is represented through the story of Dessa. The second incident was of a white woman who, in North Carolina in 1830, provided a haven for escaped slaves: this is represented through the story of Ruth.⁸⁸ The novel is a tribute in part to the African American slave narrative; although Williams prefers to use the term 'liberation narrative' and *Dessa Rose* is decidedly a story about freeing oneself from the constraints of society.⁸⁹ While it is certainly true that Dessa is only a slave in the first part of the narrative, my thesis considers the ways in which Ruth, the white mistress in the story, also liberates herself from the expectations placed upon a white woman in antebellum Alabama, the setting of the novel.

⁸⁶ James Baldwin, 'Everybody's Protest Novel', in *A Literary Sourcebook on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Debra J. Rosenthal (New York and London: 2004), p.41.

⁸⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Quill, 1986).

⁸⁸ The novel was made into a musical, first staged in New York in 2005, as a reflection of the influence of rhythm and blues in Williams's work.

⁸⁹ Sherley Anne Williams taught a course at UCLA on slave narratives and later fictional works that she styled 'liberation narratives' in the course title.

Ruth Elizabeth Sutton, alternately known as Rufel, Miss Fel or Miz Ruint, is an intriguing character. Unlike some earlier incarnations of the white mistress in fiction, she is not largely demonised in the text.⁹⁰ *Dessa Rose* takes pains to explore the difficulties faced by Ruth as she navigates what David Bradley, a fellow author of a neo-slave narrative, describes as the ‘inhuman illogic’ of the world in which both women find themselves.⁹¹ Although not vilified in the novel, the character Ruth is often dismissed by early reviewers. Katherine Bucknell reduces her to a ‘sort of white mammy’ and Doris Davenport describes her as one of Dessa’s ‘white antagonists’, for example.⁹² I explore the relationship between slave and ‘quasi-mistress’, to see how each of the women respond to proximity with the other in Williams’s imagined space.⁹³

After being freed from captivity by her fellow rebels, Dessa is taken to Sutton Glen, Ruth’s plantation, and there she and her newborn are cared for by a collection of former slaves and by Ruth. Because Ruth’s husband, a riverboat gambler, has absconded, Ruth is the only remaining white authority and she allows the slaves to stay by default. During this period Ruth overturns many of her society’s most cherished expectations of white female behaviour: she suckles Dessa’s baby, becomes the lover of Nathan, one of the slaves, and ultimately takes part in a highly organised scheme to swindle money by selling her slaves and assisting their subsequent escape and resale, sharing the plunder with her black co-conspirators. During this time Dessa and Ruth forge an uneasy allegiance that becomes the site of mutual respect, and I consider the emergence of their friendship. I proceed to examine how this novel posits a new possibility for family, a move away from the parasitism and factions of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and towards the chance of a mutually beneficial black and white family.

⁹⁰ Examples of fictional white mistresses who are demonized include Missy Anne in Alex Haley’s *Roots*, Margaret Weylin in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and The Bat in Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child*.

⁹¹ David Bradley, ‘On the Lam from Race and Gender’, *The New York Times Book Review*, 3rd August 1986, p.7.

⁹² Katherine Bucknell, ‘Slave to the Slaves’, in *Times Literary Supplement* (4398), 1987, p.765.

⁹³ Marta Sanchez, ‘The Estrangement Effect in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*’, *Genders*, 15 (1992), 21-36.

In its re-imagining of family and in moving the action from the plantation of Dessa's youth, to the Wilson Coflee, the Sutton Plantation and eventually the West and the East of the country, *Dessa Rose* considers the scope of America's response to slavery through what Dana Williams coins 'the journey to healing through enquiry.'⁹⁴ The journey taken in the novel forms part of a retroactive quest for identity that characterises retrospective plantation fiction, but it also charts the journey of assuming authority for the story told.⁹⁵ This is seen most markedly in the titles of the three sections of the novel. The first section, 'The Darky' presents Dessa from the perspective of Adam Nehemiah, a white writer who seeks to make his fortune by writing an exposé of slave rebellion with Dessa as its subject, and who eventually becomes obsessed with Dessa, and the final section, 'The Negress', offers Dessa's own point of view. Thus the revelations move from a position of ignorance to a position of knowledge. But the second section, 'The Wench', is presented from the perspective of Ruth. This is where my interest lies, because it moves the trajectory of authority forward from *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which uses a third-person narrator, to a position in which the text is focalised through the white mistress.

The novel which allows the clearest appraisal of the white mistress in women's writing about slavery is one that re-appropriates her voice in fiction. This is the remit of Valerie Martin's *Property*, published in 2003.⁹⁶ Despite popular and critical success, including winning the Orange Prize, there has been little scholarly response to this text to date.⁹⁷ Arguably this

⁹⁴ Dana A. Williams, 'Contemporary African American Women Writers', in *African American Women's Literature*, ed. by Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.71-86 (p.75).

⁹⁵ The use of retrospective fiction about slavery as a form of 'healing' for black women in particular will not be a subject of this thesis. It is treated in depth by several scholars. See Venetia K. Patton, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp.xv-xviii and pp.121-49; Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.3-42 and Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp.144-50.

⁹⁶ Valerie Martin, *Property* (London: Abacus, 2003).

⁹⁷ The Orange Prize for fiction, established in 1996, is an annual prize awarded by a panel of female judges to the best work in women's fiction from around the world.

reflects the fact that the novel's perspective is not that of a female slave, the character who continues to inspire literary interest, and is instead focussed on the white mistress.⁹⁸ My reading of *Property* responds to Walcott's concerns about valorising history; I argue that the novel does indeed refuse to present history itself as a 'culpable past', yet it allows an appraisal of the culpability of the narrator, Manon Gaudet.⁹⁹ What the novel does is to explore the role of the white mistress directly through the immediacy of the first-person perspective and in this it most fully opens a space to confront guilt. Indeed, guilt is exposed in the novel largely because it is not acknowledged by the protagonist and this sets up fruitful parallels with the other novels I examine.

Property is set in 1828 in Louisiana and it centres on the experiences of Manon, a former belle from New Orleans, and her life as a reluctant slave mistress. The spectre of miscegenation is confronted in the novel because Manon shares her home with a beautiful slave woman, Sarah, and her two children, fathered by Gaudet. I explore the novel's minute attention to the relationship between Manon and Sarah, two women who might have been allies and yet are portrayed as enemies throughout. The fact that Sarah and Manon both hate Gaudet does not unite them and in this their reaction is testament to Fox-Genovese's observation that '[w]omen were bound to each other in the household, not in sisterhood, but by their specific and different relations to its master.'¹⁰⁰ Sarah and Manon's respective relations with

⁹⁸ Two recent novels about slavery redress this balance in part by offering the perspectives of both mistresses and slaves. These novels, Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008) and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010), are set in the Caribbean and so are beyond the remit of this thesis.

⁹⁹ The name Manon already has literary associations with the novel's New Orleans setting. Manon Lescaut, in the popular eighteenth-century novel by Abbe Prevost, was immortalised in no fewer than three operas, by Auber (1856), Massenet (1884) and Puccini (1893), which enjoy continued success into the twenty-first century. In the original novel, *Manon Lescaut* (1731), Manon is a wilful girl who is torn between true love and a life of material luxury. Society punishes Manon for pursuing two men but refusing to commit herself to either course. She is eventually arrested for theft and prostitution, imprisoned and ultimately exiled. Although slavery is not a concern in the operas, there are clear parallels between the original heroine and the white mistress in *Property*. For more on the relevance of *Manon Lescaut* to New Orleans culture see Helen Taylor, 'The South through Other Eyes', in *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, ed. by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp.317-34 (pp.322-24).

¹⁰⁰ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.101.

Gaudet and the tensions that slavery imposes form the central concerns of the novel. Rebellion is another tension that is central to the plot of the novel and this emerges in two distinct ways: rumours of insurrection come to fruition when a band of fugitive slaves invade the plantation by force, killing Gaudet and injuring Manon; and Sarah rebels against her owners by escaping on their horse on the night that this takes place.

In the course of her narrative Manon records details of her marriage and her loathing of her husband, whose first name she never reveals. She exposes her refusal to have children with him and her resentment at the children he has fathered with her personal slave. After Gaudet has been killed on the night of the insurrection and Sarah has made her escape, Manon recovers partially from her physical injuries. Her face is irreparably scarred and she loses the movement in her right arm. She sells everything to do with the Gaudet Plantation to pay her husband's creditors and moves to live in her late mother's home in the city. Yet for Manon recovery does not refer to her physical impairment, it means recovering her 'property', and she sets out to retrieve it by sending a slave catcher to find and return Sarah. Manon's pursuit of Sarah is relentless. She outwits her detective and guesses that Sarah's admirer, a free black man, has helped Sarah to evade capture, by sending her on a ship dressed as a white man. This escape, echoing the historical flight in 1848 recorded by William and Ellen Craft in the slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, can be pieced together through what Manon learns. Sarah is recaptured and restored to Manon's new home. The novel does not conclude with Manon feeling triumphant, however. Not only is she physically disfigured, but she is portrayed as emotionally damaged and morally compromised. Manon chooses to focus her attention on what she perceives as the harms done to her and appears incapable of recognising her own culpability in Sarah's suffering. Her obsession with Sarah evolves into a fierce dependence, partly because the system of slavery permits their continued bond.

In several ways the three novels I explore respond not only to the overarching influence of nineteenth-century figurations of the white mistress

character, notably those enshrined within *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but they also tacitly speak to one another. A trajectory of understanding emerges, whereby more about the white mistress's complicity in slavery is revealed over time. The novels I explore witness a move away from grudging respect for the white mistress and even a degree of exoneration for her guilt in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, to a more considered portrayal of a white mistress and her prejudices in *Dessa Rose*, to an uncomfortable portrait of a white mistress who does not attempt exculpation even while its protagonist never openly acknowledges her guilt in *Property*. Indeed, *Property* is a troubling book because while it never provides final resolutions, it does act in part at least as an admission of guilt and so it responds to the criticism levelled against *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* that the white mistress is partially redeemed in Cather's novel. Unlike Sapphira, Manon has no loyal protector of her memory; unlike Ruth she is not remembered favourably by Dessa's record, in which she claims that none of the white people she ever met were 'the equal of Ruth.'¹⁰¹ Instead, Manon can reveal only her own solipsistic thoughts. Through revisiting history and repositioning the white mistress, then, each of the novels I explore in this thesis contributes to Graham's project of offering 'arbiters of memory.'¹⁰² Furthermore, in my exploration of the role of the white mistress in relation to her slave women, her family and in the situation of her home, I share in this project of re-evaluating the history of slavery through fiction.

Each of the three chapters here is introduced by a brief contextual section, providing details on the historical and literary understanding of, respectively, the white mistress's relationship with her slave, the white mistress's relationship with her family, and the white mistress's relationship with her plantation home. In Chapter One I consider three stereotypes that applied to nineteenth-century women: the belle for white women and jezebel or mammy for black women, and how these are perpetuated and reconsidered in retrospective fiction about slavery. I argue that these stereotypes influence the relationship between mistress and slave, leading to

¹⁰¹ Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Quill, 1986), p.236.

¹⁰² Graham, p.9.

the mistress's obsession with her counterpart as well as interdependence between mistress and slave. In Chapter Two I explore how the reality of familial responsibilities for the historical white mistress differs from the portrait of the mythical white mistress. I proceed to examine the portrayal of the fictional white mistress in relation to her husband and father and to her children. I argue that these novels expose how family ties are damaged not only for the slave but for the mistress in these novels. In Chapter Three I address the importance of the plantation setting in fiction about slavery. Specifically, I posit the plantation as a Gothic space for both the white mistress and her female slave. I begin the chapter by offering a brief description of the Southern plantation from historical sources as well as a consideration of the tradition of using Gothic tropes to present the landscape of slavery in plantation settings. Lastly, I explore the plantation home in retrospective fiction about slavery as characterised by *das unheimliche*, claustrophobia and voyeurism, for both mistress and slave. Overall, this thesis reconsiders the role of the antebellum white mistress as deployed retrospectively in terms of her complicity within, and consequent suffering from, the institution of slavery.

Chapter One

One sister have I in our house,
And one, a hedge away.
There's only one recorded,
But both belong to me.

-Emily Dickinson (Poem 14)

The White Mistress and Her Female Slaves

Historical and Literary Stereotypes

This chapter examines the counterpoint between the antebellum white mistress and her female slave. Counterpoint means both a sounding together of melodies and contrasting element, and I argue that the white mistress and her female slave are interdependent, much like alternate, complementary melodies in a piece of music, so that the representation of one is dependent on the representation of the other; but that they are simultaneously presented as contrasting elements, and often as opposites, in many ways.¹⁰³ To do this, I outline the ways in which mistresses and

¹⁰³ Since 2000 critics have opened up the field of understanding representations of whiteness and blackness as they coalesce in American fiction about the South, from various distinctive approaches. Sharon Monteith addresses the concept of inter-racial sisterhood in novels with a Southern setting. She advances the view that whilst texts by African-American female novelists tend to present white women as largely oblivious to their oppression of black women, with the notable exception of *Dessa Rose*; texts written by white female novelists are 'frequently much more utopian and therapeutic- providing a soft-focus conciliatory perspective' (p.5). Nevertheless, Monteith acknowledges, most of the texts that attend to cross-racial friendships emphasise the challenges posed by the power dynamics implicit in the racial contexts that obtained in the past and in the moments of the texts' production. Monteith focuses primarily on popular, contemporary fiction, with an emphasis on novels that foreground individual friendships between white and black female characters and that use fiction to 'imagine the conditions in which attachments between black and white women might form the basis of community at the end of the twentieth century' (p.27). See Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000) Tara McPherson provides a lucid account of the function of images of the South in American culture. In particular, she introduces the concept of a 'lenticular lens' as a way of considering racial identities enacted as black and white counterpoints. She explains how 'a lenticular image is composed when two separate images are interlaced or combined in a special way' (p.25). The device works so that each image can be viewed discreetly but at points it seems as if they are overlaid one on top of the other. This is a useful analogy for exploring the inter-relatedness of representations of white and black Southern women. McPherson applies it to the book and the film of *Gone with the Wind* (1939;1940) and the sequel, *Scarlett* (1991), as well as to other iconic images of Southern culture, such as the Confederate flag. See Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham and London: Duke University, 2003). Tim A. Ryan explores a range of American novels about slavery, written since World War I. He includes a focus on *Gone with the Wind* and its sequels, including Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (1991).

slaves were commonly perceived, particularly in the Southern states of America in the century preceding the Civil War, through an exploration of three key stereotypes that applied.

Stereotypes are naturally applicable to certain historical moments, but they are also essentially perpetuated over time. The three stereotypes I examine here, the belle, jezebel and mammy, make up extreme characterisations of the white mistress in the case of the belle and of black female slaves in the case of jezebel and mammy. I outline how each of the characterisations draws upon the others to contribute to a rigid set of social expectations, predicated upon racist assumptions of hierarchies, where, put simply, white women were venerated and black women were vilified. I do not seek to consider the images of belle, jezebel and mammy as definitive, but rather to interrogate how retrospective narratives of slavery support, supplant, trouble or resist these stereotypes, and in so doing how the effect of this fiction serves to imagine different social realities. Through a consideration of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property*, in particular, I will explore the degree to which writers returning to the theme of slavery uphold or challenge the three stereotypes.

My project, then, looks more closely at responses to the stereotypes that have emerged in retrospective plantation fiction. Of course, a caveat

Ryan considers the connections and connectedness of the myriad discourses of slavery and refutes the notion that black and white authors present the South in radically opposed ways. See *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery Since Gone with the Wind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana, 2008). Michael Bibler also addresses relationships between fictional black and white women in Southern texts. He posits that the closeness between mistresses and maids can offer a challenge to patriarchy because they can constitute a kind of 'egalitarian mutuality' (p.23). Bibler's interest is in a queer reading of texts whereby he asserts that "homo-ness" operates on a level that is not necessarily sexual. He argues compellingly that same-sex individuals of different races, living in close proximity due to the conditions of slavery, are implicated in 'a queer nexus of queer relations that stands in opposition to the cultural edifice of heterosexuality and to the rigid hierarchies of paternalism and patriarchy that shape the plantation world in which they live' (p.151). See Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation 1936-1968* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

persists, which is explicated compellingly by Joanne Dobson. She states that any overview that takes stereotypes too literally can be reductive:

An overview [...] would seriously problematise any attempt to present totalising, definitive structures of the popular representation of women because it would reveal a more varied and individualised representation of women than has been previously understood [...] Any attempt to define cultural types in the representation of women must avoid the temptation to take the part for the whole or to take the rudimentary outlines of the stereotype for the full expressive effect of its realisation.¹⁰⁴

With this caution in mind, however, it is possible to determine the influence that social stereotypes obtained. White and black women lived together in the South, but they lived very different lives. The hierarchical norms that were applied owing to slavery supported different expectations for white and black Southern women. Fiction about women and slavery, and in particular the novels that attend to the white mistress character that I examine in this thesis, tend to utilise these stereotypes in order to undercut and complicate any ready acceptance of such representations: this is part of what revisiting slavery demands. Whilst arguably *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* upholds the stereotypes, *Dessa Rose* and *Property* challenge these representations and disrupt earlier myths of the Southern belle, jezebel and mammy. My aim is to look at the inter-relatedness of mistress and slave, and how the rendering of the mistress in fiction is dependent on the responses to her slave women and vice versa. What the historical source material provides is evidence to support the fact that white and black women led different lives because of these expectations, and that the expectations in turn gave rise to the entrenched stereotypes that pertained according to race.

In 1984 Dorothy Sterling assembled a collection of writings by black women about the experience of antebellum slavery. The work draws upon over 1,000 sources. Introducing the collection, Sterling notes:

The difference between the experiences of most black and white women is striking. While white women were hampered by the bonds of 'true womanhood' and hold that their sphere was the home, the black woman was enslaved. Her job was to work and

¹⁰⁴ Joanne Dobson, 'Portraits of the Lady: Imagining Woman in Nineteenth-Century America', *American Literary History*, 3 (1991), 396-404 (p.396).

produce workers. Her master owned her in a literal sense. He could beat her, sell her away from her family, and keep her at backbreaking labour.¹⁰⁵

Here Sterling outlines a crucial distinction between the constraints placed on white and black women, in that white women may have experienced metaphorical bondage because of social expectations, but for black women such bondage was literal. Claudia Tate's study also considers the effect of the 'cult of true womanhood' on the different races. She claims that 'slave women, although compelled to be mothers, existed not only outside institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and family; they also existed outside all four institutions' social constructions of female respectability.'¹⁰⁶ Piety and purity were not expected from slave women. Their work was not limited to the domestic sphere, although their submission to the master's orders was nevertheless absolute. Indeed, slave women were often expected to carry out field labour and other work associated with men and they were subject to the same sort of physical punishments as slave men.¹⁰⁷ The code of 'true womanhood' was not expected to extend to slave women. I concur with Deborah Gray White that whilst 'black and white womanhood were interdependent [...] black and white women had so little in common because the sexism they both experienced kept them apart.'¹⁰⁸ This is because the cultural expectations that demanded that white women privilege the roles of wife and mother differed for black women, who were instead obliged to enact the roles of labourer and breeder; in other words mistresses and slaves can be understood very differently in terms of perceived femininity.

¹⁰⁵ Dorothy Sterling, *We are your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: Norton, 1984), p.xv.

¹⁰⁶ Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.25. For more on the 'cult of true womanhood' see my Introduction, pp. 13-24.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the work schedules of male and female slaves see Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.190-196. For more on punishments and female slaves see Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina 1830-80* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp.85-90.

¹⁰⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London: Norton, 1999), p.6.

This opposition is clearly demonstrated in literature. Perhaps the earliest archetypal literary belle is *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* tiny heroine, Little Eva, but as Leslie Fiedler notes, Little Eva is portrayed in direct contrast with her black counterpart, the slave Topsy. Eva is the 'Good Good Girl, blonde, asexual goddess of nursery or orphanage or old plantation house.'¹⁰⁹ Fiedler describes how Stowe's portrait of the two little girls makes one good and one bad and so 'the moral polarity has become an ethnic one!' Here, for Fiedler, the novel enacts a mythological dichotomy, where 'the Pale Maiden as dying child, Little Eva, is paired off with the Dark Lady as pesky brat, Topsy.' He describes the dark lady figure as 'surrogate for all the Otherness against which an Anglo-Saxon world attempts to define itself.'¹¹⁰ In this, the counterpointing between black and white asserts itself in relation to the fictional representation of women, anticipating Morrison's later argument that the construction of whiteness is not possible without an understanding of blackness in its midst.¹¹¹ From the earliest representations the belle is

¹⁰⁹ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), p.251.

¹¹⁰ Fiedler, pp.281-2.

¹¹¹ See Morrison, *Playing*. For Morrison a 'black presence' also exists within American literature that is written by white writers and this should not be marginalised (p.5). In her desire to foreground what she calls the 'Africanist presence' (p.5) within American literature, Morrison also manages to cast light on what can be understood as 'literary whiteness' (p.9). Indeed, she suggests that central aspects in the constructed American character, including individualism and social engagement, are formed as 'responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence' (p.5). This signification emerges because American ideas of freedom are always, paradoxically, constructed in response to the fact of bonded others living in their midst: what it means to be autonomous and free is necessarily predicated on what it means to be powerless and in bondage. Morrison puts the case that the racial hierarchy in America is much cherished as a way of understanding dread and desire, through othering, because 'freedom [...] can be relished more deeply in a cheek-by-jowl existence with the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalized, the silenced', and this, she insists, sets up an ideological dependence on racism (p.64). Accepting and understanding the importance of a 'distancing Africanism,' also gives rise to the other key aspect of Morrison's project, that of recognising the function of 'literary blackness' in forming literary 'whiteness' (p.8;p.9). She posits that this 'Africanism' is crucial to forming and articulating white identity as it is the 'vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny' (p.52). To this end Morrison considers texts by canonical writers including Melville, Twain, Faulkner and Hemingway. Whilst the concept of literary whiteness and racism is a vast and interesting project in its own right, of greater interest here is where Morrison challenges critics to go further and to consider 'the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it,' because, as she contends, 'it seems both poignant and striking

presented as opposite to the slave, not so much associated with labour as with leisure.

This life of leisure and luxury was often dispensed with after her marriage, however. The change afforded by marriage and taking on the role of mistress is exposed in all three of the novels I consider. Kathryn Lee Seidel describes how belles were 'distressed' and 'disappointed' when their ideals were sacrificed for reality, pointing out that 'by the change in status from a pampered, sought-after belle to a hardworking but anonymous wife, the belle-turned-labourer was herself a labourer on the plantation.'¹¹² This transition from belle to mistress is also conveyed in earlier fiction about slavery. Bel Tracy in John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832) is the first belle in literature.¹¹³ She is not beautiful but is passionate and impulsive. She is the daughter of landed gentry and is marriageable and accomplished. The ideals of home and hearth and the accompanying fiercely conservative attitudes, coupled with a sense of superiority, are borne out in the literary home of the belle, plantation literature, popular between the 1820s and 1850s.¹¹⁴ These novels also acted as apologies for Southern culture and generally belles were still presented as virtuous and loyal as well as beautiful. This is until Marie St Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* broke the mould, as part of Stowe's abolitionist project. Although, as Seidel remarks, she 'reinforces the image of the belle as ideal by being its opposite.'¹¹⁵ Despite the fact that, as aforementioned, Little Eva best personifies the belle-in-waiting, her mother opens the question about how a belle may react to the transition to wife and the unrealistic expectations placed upon her. Marie is characterised by narcissism, and her hypochondria and hypocrisy

how avoided and unanalysed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject' (p.11). This emphasis on the impact of slavery on the perpetrator of racism is my main concern here.

¹¹² Kathryn Lee Seidel, *The Southern Belle in the American Novel* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1985), p.7.

¹¹³ Joy Jordan-Lake identifies a cast of stock characters to have emerged from *Swallow Barn*. They include, 'the hospitable, if occasionally silly slaveholder; the lovely, capricious southern belle; and the faithful, domineering mammy'. See Jordan-Lake, *Whitewashing*, p.3.

¹¹⁴ Examples of plantation novels include Nathaniel Beverley Tucker's *The Partisan Leader* (1836) and William Gilmore Simms's *Woodcraft* (1852), the last in a series of novels set in South Carolina.

¹¹⁵ Seidel, p.13.

stem from her indulgence as a pampered Southern daughter, with slaves to rely on for her every need.

For, unlike her black counterpart, the belle was associated not with work and 'breeding', but with delicacy of constitution, marked by a pale complexion. Light skin, preferably accompanied by light hair and eyes, was also seen, in the portrait that Hazel Carby identifies, as representative of 'the presence of a pure soul.'¹¹⁶ This virtue of purity was meant to harness chastity and moral superiority—not only superiority over black women but also over men. The belle was supposed to win her husband with her demure charms, whilst conversely her perceived black rival's charm consisted in ensnaring helpless men; it was figured as an evil beguilement. Carby observes that, in literature at least, 'the white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves.'¹¹⁷ Thus the blame for promiscuity rested with the woman, either, if she were black, as a seductress or, if she were white, as too morally weak to prevent her husband from straying. As Seidel points out, 'the girl who is told, in effect, to become a lovely object can become a narcissist, self-admiring, as well as admired for her lovely shell.'¹¹⁸ I agree with Seidel and her suggestion that the belle is in the invidious position of being expected to be passive and engaging whilst simultaneously being aware of the double standards that allowed white men to indulge in sexual relations with enslaved women, who were in their turn viewed stereotypically as being promiscuous and available.

Much of this sophism relied upon the false notion that black women were sexually voracious, whilst white women were so morally superior as to be inured to sexual desire. Fiedler asserts that there were two types of women in American literature up to this period: 'all through the history of our novel, there had appeared side by side with the Fair Maiden, the Dark Lady—sinister embodiment of the sexuality denied the snow maiden.' He

¹¹⁶ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.26.

¹¹⁷ Carby, p.27.

¹¹⁸ Seidel, p.xv.

considers the racial other in the context of Native Americans but also posits that the idea of woman is bifurcated into 'Fair Virgin and Dark Lady, the glorious phantom at the mouth of the cave, and the hideous Moor who lurks within.'¹¹⁹ It is difficult to resist extending Fiedler's analogy of the Indian and the white woman to assimilate the slave woman as archetypal other. At any rate, the myth of the sexually pernicious black woman is best understood in the rendering of the jezebel stereotype. This stereotype tends to reduce black women to their sexual or reproductive functions and it is this essentialising which writers of retrospective plantation fiction address. For example, novels including Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* portray slave women who are raped by their white masters, in part to decry the image of promiscuous black women.¹²⁰

The jezebel stereotype came from a blend of misconceptions about black sexuality. It emerged partly from early slave-buying expeditions by westerners and their encounters with African women in-situ, bare breasted and performing tasks that were perceived by western observers to be typically masculine. These encounters led to westerners conflating nudity with licentiousness, which positioned the black woman as 'a person governed almost entirely by her libido.'¹²¹ The material result of thinking of black women as primarily sensual also supported the market forces of slavery by increasing the slave population through miscegenation: if enslaved women were thought of as promiscuous then this served to justify their rape and impregnation by slave-holders. For, as White correctly points out, 'since causal correlations have always been drawn between sensuality and fecundity, the increase of the slave population seemed to be evidence of the slave woman's lust', and so this too worked to the detriment of the image of black women in popular consciousness.¹²² Indeed, it made them a convenient scapegoat in their own degradation and exploitation. Also, a

¹¹⁹ Fiedler, p.276.

¹²⁰ See the assault on Sethe by the nephews of Schoolteacher in *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), pp.68-70 and the rape of Alice by Rufus in *Kindred* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp.146-51.

¹²¹ Gray White, p.29.

¹²² White, p.31.

system that encouraged 'breeding' also produced capital for slave owners because from the mid-seventeenth century, the child was subject to the condition of the mother, and more children meant more profit.¹²³

Another factor that supported the misconception of black women as sexually available was the auction block experience; this is because slaves for sale were exposed and inspected in a way that would have outraged white decency if it were perpetrated on white women.¹²⁴ Not only were black enslaved women treated very differently from white women, but they were treated similarly to black men, and this, too, seemed to reduce their implied femininity. An accepted image of slave women as sexually precocious may well have supported the increase of the slave population, but it also contributed to inter-racial conflict, particularly between white and black women in the South. Miscegenation became a fact of slavery, although it was not without its critics.¹²⁵ Yet it was the wives of slaveholders who struggled with the material and emotional responsibility for slave children who were fathered from within the white household. Revenge was often taken not on the men, but on the black women involved. They could be sold, sent to work in the fields or have their children mistreated or sold away. Cassie in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides an example of a slave who is abused in such a way.¹²⁶ Jealousy, often to the point of sexual obsession, on the part of the white mistress also existed, in part occasioned by the association of black women with frank sexuality that eluded their white mistresses.

¹²³ In 1662 the Virginia Assembly dictated that the child would follow the condition of the mother: *partus sequitur ventrem*. Maryland clung to the opposite until 1712, but by the early eighteenth century the so-called 'drop of ink formula' was established, whereby any evident black heritage defined a child as liable to be a slave.

¹²⁴ Gray-White explains that 'since Southern society associated public nudity with lasciviousness, this exposure of the slave woman's body led to an unconscious equating of black women with promiscuity' (p.32).

¹²⁵ Two representative contemporary antebellum reactions to miscegenation belong to Josiah Nott and George Fitzhugh. Nott, a leading surgeon and academic in the field of medicine, and also an exponent of the doctrine of ethnology, argued that miscegenation diluted white bloodlines. See Gilpin Faust, *Ideology*, pp.206-39. Fitzhugh, a lawyer and editorialist for the Richmond *Enquirer* and *De Bow's Review*, and a strong advocate of slavery, denied white responsibility for the mulatto population, countering that slavery uplifted and reformed black women. See Gilpin Faust, *Ideology*, pp.272-99.

¹²⁶ For more on the role of Cassie in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* see Richard Yarborough, 'Strategies of Black Characterisation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Early Afro-American Novel', in *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Eric Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.45-84 (pp.55-6).

And yet the jezebel stereotype is not the only stereotype that applied to black women. The stereotype of the mammy arguably operates as a response to the stereotype of the jezebel. This is because it sanctions the practical necessity of slave women's role in raising white children and working closely with white families. The mammy stereotype, in foregrounding an image of a de-sexualised, devoted servant, helped to ameliorate the image of black women as promiscuous and dangerous, instead serving to neutralise this perception. White explains that 'to successfully rebut abolitionist charges of Southern degeneracy, Southerners had to come up with alternative justifications of slavery and a more positive image of black women.'¹²⁷ This is another aspect of the white woman's dependence on the black woman; the white mistress did not only rely on the slave to define her sexuality in opposition to the jezebel, but she needed the mammy in order to feel beneficent. This is because the mammy was often perceived as a dearly loved and fiercely loyal member of the family and the presence of a mammy served not only to undercut the negative associations with the jezebel, but to shore up another myth that developed under slavery, that of a harmonious white and black family.¹²⁸

This thesis is also concerned with how the texts treat the white mistress's relationship with the female slave who occupies the mammy role in her household. This stereotype also has a historical and a literary heritage.¹²⁹ The 1881 novel, *The Bloody Chasm*, by John William De Forest, has one of the earliest literary mammy characters, extending the role beyond that of Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the famous anti-Uncle Tom novel by Mary Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, by offering this character as a mother substitute and advisor to the heroine.¹³⁰ Here, the heroine Virginia

¹²⁷ Gray-White, p.44.

¹²⁸ For more on the myth of the bi-racial family see Eugene Genovese, 'Our Family, White and Black: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholder's Worldview', in *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South*, ed. by Carol Blesser (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.69-87.

¹²⁹ For a survey of the representation of the mammy in historical sources see Minrose Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp.79-83.

¹³⁰ Aunt Phillis is characterised by her loyalty to her white owners. Typical of this is her declaration 'you've done your duty by me and mine; and I hope where I have come short

represents Southern honour that must be healed after the 'bloody chasm' of the war. De Forest's fictional mammy also offers a representation that is consistent with the historical sources:

This, therefore, is the broad outline of [m]ammy. She was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She served also as friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother.¹³¹

And yet the term mammy is a misnomer. I agree with Venetria Patton, who argues that mammy is 'ultimately a symbol of exploitation rather than an illustration of cross-racial bonding,' because the role of the mammy is artificial as 'mothering was viewed as "natural"; however, mammy does not mother her "natural" children, but her master's.'¹³² Often motherhood was usurped from these women because they were required to nurse and care for the white children of the family, whose needs were always privileged above their own black children, even if they continued to live at the same site and had not been sold away after being weaned.

The novels I consider are each informed by the prevalent stereotypes. They show alertness to the social stereotypes that determined the importance of the 'cult of true womanhood' for white women and its lack of application for enslaved black women, even should they have wished to espouse the values and virtues that applied to white women.¹³³ In many ways *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property* answer back to the literary types enshrined in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly in the opposing characters of Little Eva and Marie St Clare in understanding the belle, and in the portrayal of Cassie as a Jezebel and Aunt Chloe as the loyal mammy. These types were perpetuated in later literature, including the so-called plantation novels and in many ways they are upheld in Cather's elegiac Southern novel. In relation to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, I explore

you will forgive me', in Mary H. Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin: or, Southern Life As It Is* (Philadelphia: Grambo, 1852), p.206.

¹³¹ White, p.49.

¹³² Patton, pp.33-5.

¹³³ For more on black women's desire to conform to contemporary feminine expectations see Sterling, pp.18-30.

evidence of admiration for the white mistress and her loyal retinue and a grudging respect for the status quo, although ambiguities do persist. But the stereotypes are troubled and undercut in the novels written after the Civil Rights era, when such types are subject to rigorous revision. *Dessa Rose* portrays a belle who is willing to question her status and a jezebel who is misrepresented, as well as calling into question the myth of the mammy altogether. *Property* offers a more complex consideration of a belle, in her own words, and in conflating the role of the jezebel and the mammy in one character, this novel problematises the whole remit of stereotypes.

Ambiguities and the Belle Stereotype

The retrospective writing I explore engages the stereotype of the belle in its portrayal of the white mistress character. Sapphira is competent and diligent, yet she indulges her reliance on her 'people', ringing her bell to call her servants to her on one occasion, just to reassure herself of her authority over them.¹³⁴ And, of course, in her plan to have Nancy raped by Martin, Sapphira's narcissism manifests itself as tyranny. Ruth is self-absorbed for much of *Dessa Rose*. She is not competent at managing her household and tends to dwell on her brief coming-out period and her subsequent disappointment in marriage. Yet, *Dessa Rose* troubles the image of the Southern belle because Ruth's character, to some extent, transcends the limitations placed upon her by society's expectations, at least insofar as she learns from the slaves. But it is in the portrayal of Manon in *Property* that the stereotype of the belle is most thoroughly problematised. On one hand Manon's indolence and solipsism are reminiscent of Marie St Clare; but this novel gives access to the white mistress's own reflections on her position and her misery at the life she leads. Hence the white mistress's solipsism is exposed and tacitly condemned by the revelation that the life of a belle is not luxurious but is instead one of compromise. In the novel's unsympathetic portrait of a white mistress it answers directly the criticisms raised about

¹³⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.106-7.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, that the white mistress in Cather's novel is too sympathetic.

Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* presents a complicated picture of a slave mistress because her position is never fully criticised. Her portrayal, while admitting guilt on the part of the slave mistress, also reveals a degree of elegy for the loss of the Southern belle. Sapphira Colbert is presented as a faded Southern belle. She has wealth, privilege and authority, but she also suffers from declining health. Because she is 'an heiress' she has the power associated with Southern aristocracy, but she now suffers from an 'affliction' and wears a skirt to cover her 'deformity,' and so her physical power is compromised.¹³⁵ Any appraisal of Sapphira is imbued with ambiguity partly because she is never fully demonised in the novel. Roseanne V. Camacho, for example, sees Sapphira as 'the site of both praise and blame.'¹³⁶ Sapphira's feeling of responsibility for her slaves' welfare is seen as a redeeming quality and the subject of admiration in the novel, as is her stoicism. Gayle Wald considers Sapphira's stoic response to her illness and uses it as a starting point to explore how Cather's readers are 'encouraged to grow to love, or at least admire Sapphira because of her dignified way of enduring in the face of adversity, real or imagined.'¹³⁷ That Sapphira faces both 'real' and 'imagined' adversity is yet another factor underlying her characterisation: her representation is replete with such dichotomies. In this combination of both 'real' and 'imagined' adversity the ambivalence surrounding Sapphira is vividly realised in the novel. For instance, her speech is 'cultivated', although her daughter Rachel detects 'a kind of false pleasantness in the voice.'¹³⁸ Indeed, for every outright criticism of Sapphira, another aspect of grudging admiration is inserted.

¹³⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.10.

¹³⁶ Roseanne V. Camacho, 'Whites Playing in the Dark: Southern Conversations in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*', in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp.65-75 (p.72).

¹³⁷ Gayle Wald, 'Race, Labour and Domesticity in Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*', in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp. 90-97 (p.91).

¹³⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.15.

Where Camacho and Wald admit that the novel invites praise and admiration for the white mistress, I argue that this is always mitigated by at least a tacit acknowledgement of her complicity in some of the worst abuses of slavery. This is signalled again by ambiguity in the portrayal of Sapphira, for example, her voice has an ‘icy quality,’ and her mouth ‘twisted mockingly.’ She is described as having a ‘placid self esteem’, with the word ‘placid’ suggesting complacency and lack of introspection. Nevertheless, the narrative records that ‘she bore her disablement with courage; seldom referred to it, sat in her crude invalid’s chair as if it were a seat of privilege.’ However, irony undercuts this admiration: the fact that her chair was made by the local ‘carpenter and coffin maker’ marks her out already as part of a class which is dying out. Retaining the authority that her privileged position once allowed her remains Sapphira’s priority, and owing to this, ‘the thought of being befooled, hoodwinked in any way, was unendurable to her.’¹³⁹ In this she is unlikely to be alone, but her position as a slave owner, with supreme authority over others, is what allows Sapphira, after she perceives a sexual threat, to embark on a course of action that will secure her own pride intact. Her willingness to appropriate this power over her slave women’s lives, I argue, provides evidence of her guilt that cannot be ameliorated by praising the other qualities that this particular white mistress might possess.

Certainly Sapphira thinks of herself as a beneficent mistress, a force for good in the lives of her devoted minions. Indeed, an important factor in the characterisation of this white mistress is that she believes that her ‘servants’, as she calls them, benefit from the institution of slavery.¹⁴⁰ The main action of the novel takes place in Virginia in the early 1850s, against the backdrop of the debates raging over the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This setting draws attention to panoramic questions of liberty and also serves to foreground questions concerning individual freedom and identity.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.8; p.9; p.15; p.106.

¹⁴⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.12.

¹⁴¹ The Fugitive Slave Law was passed as part of a series of measures collectively known as the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to appease those states that approved of slavery

Sapphira's integrity is predicated on denying that of her slaves. Because she is old and failing, they must privilege her physical needs, in spite of any needs or desires of their own, and so her belief in her beneficence is illusory; instead she is self-serving. Her appropriation of Nancy's body permits Sapphira to conceive of the plot to have her raped by Martin. After her dream of 'disaster,' Sapphira is resolute, declaring to herself that 'she must see it through, what she had begun.'¹⁴² And here Sapphira herself inhabits a paradoxical position, in which determination, something normally admirable, is compromised in the context of slavery.

James Woodress sums up this dual perception of the white mistress as simultaneously admirably detached and invasive when he describes Sapphira as 'the cool, crafty anti-heroine', but he too points to her benevolence, as 'she takes part in celebrations and likes to see her people happy,' and so stops short of condemnation in an attitude that more closely resembles approbation, again shoring up this ambiguous portrait of a white mistress.¹⁴³ Yet surely Nancy is not 'happy' that her body and her sexuality are not under her own control. Sapphira is arguably 'crafty' in her desire to justify her position and to distance herself from the horror of what she plans to do to Nancy. After inviting Henry's lecherous nephew Martin to visit, with the express purpose of hastening the loss of Nancy's virginity and hence, she imagines, the girl's appeal for Henry, she tries to redeem herself in her own estimation.¹⁴⁴ Sapphira concedes that 'she almost believed she had urged him to come solely because she liked to have young people about.'¹⁴⁵ The 'almost' is telling, though, undercutting the validity of Sapphira's concern to see her slaves 'happy', and again suggestive of complicity in the mistress's physical abuse of her slave women.

and those which did not. The law declared that anyone who assisted an escaped slave in a non-slave state was liable to prosecution.

¹⁴² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.107.

¹⁴³ James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p.262.

¹⁴⁴ There is no evidence that being raped by Martin would make Nancy less attractive to Henry, even though Martin cannot stand the thought of Henry getting there before him. He remarks to himself, 'By God, if I thought that old sinner had been there before me!' (p.186).

¹⁴⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.154.

Rachel Blake, Sapphira's daughter, addresses her mother's ambiguity in relation to her slaves. She admits that, 'she had known her mother to show great kindness to her servants, and, sometimes, cold cruelty', and she also acknowledges that Sapphira is in a unique position to exert her authority. Rachel asserts that 'Mrs Colbert, though often generous, was entirely self-centred and thought of other people only in their relation to herself.' Nonetheless, she equivocates here, deciding that this is not the only criterion for judgement by admitting that 'one must admit inconsistencies.' Rachel acknowledges that outright condemnation of this position is more to do with her own attitude than her mother's deliberate sophism. She reflects: 'No, it ain't put on; she believes in it and they believe in it. But it ain't right.'¹⁴⁶ But, as Morrison suggests, and Rachel's opinion bears out, the characterisation of Sapphira always returns to problems associated with the authority afforded to a white woman who has control over others.¹⁴⁷ Morrison argues that the greatest challenge the novel poses is concerned with '[Cather's] struggle to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence.'¹⁴⁸ This interdependence, however, can be seen as more than a connection between the abstract forces of power, race and sexuality. Sapphira is no longer potent physically, and this fact absorbs her and contributes to the solipsism that typifies the white mistress in retrospective fiction about slavery.

As much as her authority it is her sense of decorum that epitomises Sapphira. In this, too, she adopts the expectations placed upon white Southern women. After her disappearance Sapphira does not mention Nancy's name again. Rachel reflects later that '[h]er mother would meet this situation with dignity, as she had met other misfortunes.' She knew how her mother 'hated to be overreached or outwitted' and she herself was 'sorry' to have brought 'another humiliation to one who had already lost so much.' Sapphira's losses are stressed: Rachel reflects on how Sapphira has already

¹⁴⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.169; p.220; p.221.

¹⁴⁷ Morrison, *Playing*, p.57.

¹⁴⁸ Morrison, *Playing*, p.20.

lost her 'fine figure' and her 'rosy complexion,' and the way her mother endures such losses are another occasion for admiration of this white mistress, without reflection on the countless losses Sapphira has imposed on her slaves, including, of course, Nancy's loss of her home and Till's loss of her daughter. Sapphira's dignity when facing her own death is also presented as a virtue, at least in the estimation of Henry. He regards her 'composure which he had sometimes called heartlessness but which now seemed to him strength' with admiration.¹⁴⁹ Her decorum is also reflective of her status as a Southern belle and its association with her decline adds to the note of elegy present in the narrative. Sapphira's sense of decorum does indeed rely on her strength, but her strength also relies on her possession of the heartlessness that her husband recognises, enabling her to privilege her own desires over those of others.

Dessa Rose allows for the possibility of a beneficial affiliation between the white Ruth and the black Dessa that transcends the bond offered in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as the narrative eschews decorum in favour of mutual respect. Whilst the power dynamic of mistress and slave is never absent in the novel, circumstances allow a friendship of sorts to emerge between Ruth Elizabeth Sutton, erstwhile white mistress, and Dessa Rose, escaped rebel slave, which is not based on straightforward ownership. *Dessa Rose* investigates the interdependence between a white mistress and her black female slaves in a way that further challenges preconceptions and upsets earlier stereotypes. Abandoned by her husband on her isolated plantation, Ruth possesses neither the self-assurance that can be associated with Sapphira, nor the patriarchal network to allow her to assert absolute authority. This absence opens up possibilities in that the novel posits roles for the women that transcend established social expectations in the prevalent stereotypes.

Before Ruth's role is explored, the novel offers a more conventional white mistress in the person of Emmaline, Dessa's first mistress. Her

¹⁴⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.245; p.246; p.268.

actions conform to the stereotype of belle in that she is narcissistic, but in her interaction with Dessa she more violently enacts the role of jealous mistress suggested in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Emmaline appears only briefly in the novel and her portrait echoes that of Mrs Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in that she is suspicious of her husband's interest in her female slave, yet takes out her frustration on the slave instead of her errant husband.¹⁵⁰ Emmaline is objectified as the 'Mist' at the 'House' and the only concrete information recorded about her is that she capitalises on what she imagines is a 'delicate' constitution, as she faints about 'jes any lil thang that don't be goin to suit her.' Yet even though she may appear to fulfil the stereotype of physical delicacy suggestive of a belle, her position as white mistress confers authority upon her. It is clear that Emmaline's race and status accord her power, and Dessa's lover Kaine elucidates this when he laughs, for example, at how 'one lil sickly white woman turn a house that big upside down.' Emmaline's female slaves fall victim to the usual prejudices and white misconceptions about sexually promiscuous black women and the double standards about the temptations they pose for white men. Dessa archly notes how these prejudices relate to her when she admits that, 'I too light for Mist's and not light enough for Masa.' Nevertheless, the mistress accuses Dessa of carrying the master's child and this is one of the causes of the altercation that leads to Dessa attacking her mistress.¹⁵¹ In this violent encounter and in the portrayal of Emmaline, the novel acknowledges that the mistress and slave relationship is fraught, making Dessa's relationship with Ruth all the more striking.

Ruth's portrayal calls the belle stereotype into question. Initially Ruth is characterised as a simpering former belle; she is most concerned with fashions and her memories of parties, spending her days in her rocking chair 'rocking and sewing.' Yet as the narrative progresses she gains in stature, begins to plan for the future instead of recanting the past and becomes more independent, instead of expecting to be cosseted by others.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ See Jacobs, pp.30-31.

¹⁵¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.17-18; p.41.

¹⁵² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.90.

And while it would not be possible to argue that *Dessa Rose* redeems the character of the white mistress, because Ruth is presented as complicit in slavery through most of the text, it does allow a modicum of admiration to rest with the white mistress character. Such admiration as it applies to Ruth is evinced by what McDowell refers to as ‘an ethic and an energy of cooperation,’ which she reads in the second part, or Ruth’s section, of the novel. Such an ethic is central, too, to my reading of the novel, specifically in how it applies to Ruth, whom McDowell describes as a ‘slave mistress in action, if not in fact,’ because while Dessa makes a remarkable escape from slavery through insurrection, Ruth also departs from the expectations of her gender and class as the novel charts her rejection of the role of mistress altogether.¹⁵³

Barbara Christian also identifies admiration in the novel. I agree with her that *Dessa Rose* ‘opens up the spaces in which [...] heroism and love can be explored.’¹⁵⁴ But whilst Christian considers heroism on the part of the slaves in their bid for autonomy and agency, I wish to extend my exploration to suggest a textual assimilation of Ruth within such admiration because of her transformation from conventional Southern belle to a woman who fundamentally rejects some of her society’s most cherished conventions.¹⁵⁵ Here, McDowell’s argument is germane: she claims that the rift between Dessa and Ruth can only be bridged by ‘mutual acts of imagination and self projection.’¹⁵⁶ The novel suggests that Dessa must learn the lesson of self-possession, but Ruth must learn to move beyond the self, in that she must transcend the solipsism that the position of white mistress has hitherto condoned.

¹⁵³ McDowell, p.151-2.

¹⁵⁴ Barbara Christian, “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something’: African American Women’s Historical Novels”, in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. by Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp.326-41 (p.339).

¹⁵⁵ For more on the critical response to Dessa’s heroism see Jocelyn K. Moody, ‘Ripping away the Veil of Slavery: Literacy, Communal Love and Self-Esteem in Three Slave Woman’s Narratives’, *Black American Literature Forum*, 24 (1990), 633-648 (p.645).

¹⁵⁶ McDowell, p.153.

Unlike Emmaline, who remains bound by the conventions and expectations of a belle, Ruth is prepared to change. This takes time. At first Ruth is reluctant to believe the horror stories about Dessa's experiences and those of the other slaves. The narrative records how 'Rufel shivered' because 'that couldn't be true, it was too, too awful, she thought.' She is unable to 'reconcile' the thought of the slaves' former powerlessness with Nathan's vitality, for example. It is not only that she cannot readily conceive of this level of horror but that she sees others in relation to her perspective. This is highlighted in a key scene in which Nathan mocks her, saying, 'the mistress have to see the welts in the darky's hide, eh?' and, the text reveals that, 'his tone implied that her desire for proof was mean and petty and she flushed hotly.'¹⁵⁷ That Ruth flushes with embarrassment and pique indicates that she is confronting aspects of her own character and her perceived role as privileged mistress. After she succeeds in seeing the slave woman's scars, Ruth is aware that Dessa treats her with 'stiff civility', but she comes to have a grudging respect for her: for Ruth, 'still, something in her wanted to applaud the girl's will.' Indeed, Ruth acts on this nascent respect to try to reassure Dessa, whilst reclaiming her own integrity. She insists: 'just because one mistress misused you, don't mean all of us will.'¹⁵⁸ Of course, there is irony here in that Ruth is not Dessa's mistress, but it leads Ruth to reflect on the ethics of ownership of people more generally.

The reach of the relationship of Ruth and Dessa arguably extends beyond the novel in its consideration of a possible cross-racial sisterhood.¹⁵⁹ Caroline Rody draws parallels with *Beloved*, Morrison's contemporaneous novel. She considers Ruth to be a balance for the white girl, Amy Denver, who helps the escaped slave Sethe to give birth on a boat on the Ohio River.¹⁶⁰ Rody claims that 'these "historical" exchanges with white women seem seeds of promise pointing toward a future of relationships across the

¹⁵⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.134; p.136; p.137.

¹⁵⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.147; p.140.

¹⁵⁹ The possibility of inter-racial friendship between women continues to engage novelists. For example, see Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006) and Yaba Badoe's *True Murder* (2009).

¹⁶⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp.32-5.

lines of race,' and I argue this is the very prospect held out by Ruth's transformation.¹⁶¹ That these 'interethnic connections retell black women's history as one that includes the history of others' is particularly significant because, like *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose* revisits, or to borrow Morrison's phrase, 're-memories', representations of slavery that allow a closer inspection of the dynamic at work between white and black antebellum women.¹⁶² Ruth finds respect for Dessa and Dessa remembers Ruth fondly, with her evaluation of this white woman that there were 'none the equal of Ruth' being among her final declarations in the novel. Although the women separate at the end of the narrative, meaning that the novel evades accusations of unrealistic idealism, Ruth's move away from occupying the stereotypical role of a belle is suggestive of the possibility of a genuine inter-racial connectedness.

If the white mistress's relationship to the stereotype of the belle is marked by conformity in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and disrupted by a break from convention in *Dessa Rose*, then in *Property* it is most challenged, in that this contemporary novel returns to the territory of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to offer a further condemnation of the belle character, but in a portrait that also interrogates the stereotype much more fully. Because it provides an unmediated first-person perspective, I argue that *Property* does more to confront the impact of slavery on the character of the antebellum Southern white mistress than any other novel that precedes it.¹⁶³ Despite the fact that Manon neither openly acknowledges nor even realises her personal culpability within the system, preferring to see herself as a victim, I contend that her portrayal acts as an admission of guilt in its own right. Manon's candour means that she unwittingly bears witness to her own complicity in the abuse of power that is an inalienable factor of slavery.

In Manon Gaudet, *Property* offers the least ambiguous condemnation of a white mistress in the novels I explore here. Manon is at once presented

¹⁶¹ Rody, p.30.

¹⁶² Rody, p.8; Morrison, *Beloved*, p.36.

¹⁶³ *Property* has been compared to Caryl Phillips's novel *Cambridge* (1991). This novel offers the first person perspective of a white mistress, Emily Cartwright, but it is set in the West Indies just after the abolition of the slave trade and so is beyond the remit of this thesis.

as lacking in self-awareness and utterly self-absorbed. Moreover, she is callous and exhibits no sympathy for anyone else. Not only is she dismissive about the overseer Sutter's brutality towards the Gaudet slaves, for example, and derisory about her mother's cook Peek's aspirations for her future, but Manon can only conceive of the slaves in relation to herself. When Manon allows Peek to be sold to a neighbour of the cook's own choosing, she remarks that the Peek leaves 'without so much as a word of thanks,' seemingly failing to acknowledge that the cook's continued bondage is hardly a source of gratitude to the slave.¹⁶⁴ Certainly, Manon can be condemned for her solipsism in relation to her slaves, and she also conflates what she perceives as the slaves' lack of gratitude with her husband's perception of her 'ingratitude' towards him. Manon admits to feeling as if she is enslaved: on one occasion she imagines that 'an iron collar, such as [she has] seen used to discipline field women, were fastened about her skull.'¹⁶⁵ In imagining her own suffering to be commensurate with that of her slave women, Manon effectively usurps the victimhood of others, and the injustice of this serves to add to her condemnation as a character.

It is no accident that Manon's maiden name is not revealed until almost half way through the narrative: it is Gray.¹⁶⁶ By this stage Manon is clearly established as a character who thinks in terms of black and white in two significant ways: she is not alert to nuance and is determined to shift the blame for her sufferings to others, and she also situates her sufferings within the remit of the 'lies' that white slave-holding society embraces about the relations between the races, yet without acknowledging the suffering of others if they happen to be black. Alongside the obvious verbal irony, in some ways 'Gray' characterises Manon well because it also draws attention to how she resists aligning herself with her husband and hence her married name, Gaudet. The phonetic resonance between Gaudet and "gaudy" may explain why Manon never uses her husband's name as her own. Gaudy means brightly coloured or showily decorated, and it is precisely the

¹⁶⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.92.

¹⁶⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.11; p.198.

¹⁶⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.93.

ostentation and vulgarity of her boorish husband that she rejects. At one point Manon declares that he ‘drained the colour from every scene’ and this factor, too, may explain why she remains ‘Gray.’¹⁶⁷ Yet, there is also the moral dimension of associating a character with ‘gray.’ Arguably, Manon’s portrayal is not entirely one-sided: it does arouse some sympathy, meaning she falls short of being entirely unsympathetic. This ambivalence contributes to the novel’s lack of resolution; *Property* resists simple binary oppositions of perception, bifurcating black and white into ‘evil’ and ‘good’, also suggested by the name ‘Gray’, as well as by the complex characterisation of the narrator and main protagonist.

The characterisation of Manon serves to confront the system of tacit, and indeed active, tyranny under slavery within which white women participated. Martin acknowledges the challenges presented not only in her attempt to recapture something of the past, but in the difficulty inherent in facing up to inherited guilt. In an interview conducted shortly after she won the Orange Prize, Martin avers, ‘I started thinking about slavery because people had written about it in ways I thought cheapened it. It was a difficult thing for white people to write about in an honest way.’¹⁶⁸ Part of the candour in Martin’s approach, and the unfinished nature of trying to come to terms with slavery, is advertised in the opening sentence of the novel and in Manon’s own words when she declares that ‘[i]t never ends.’¹⁶⁹ As Joyce Carol Oates points out, the whole novel hinges on this opening sentence. It captures the central thematic but also the terse voice of the protagonist.¹⁷⁰ And yet the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ permits the narrator to distance herself from the immediate action, allowing a shading into grey—a moral ambivalence—that is not immediately associated with the first person personal pronoun, I.

¹⁶⁷ Martin, *Property*, p.52; p.166.

¹⁶⁸ Marianne Brace, ‘Interview with Valerie Martin’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 4th July, 2004.

¹⁶⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.3.

¹⁷⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *Uncensored: Views and (Re)Views* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p.131.

Manon's portrait further interrogates the stereotype of the belle who becomes a mistress. Morrison, in her endorsement of the novel, writes that 'this fresh, unsentimental look at what slave-owning does to (and for) one's interior life must be a first,' and it is in this departure from previous fiction about slavery that Martin's temerity pertains.¹⁷¹ I want to stress that the novel presents a narrator who is simultaneously compelling and repellent. Some sympathy may be aroused for Manon because of her circumstances. *Property* makes it clear that a woman in Manon's position—the only white woman in her vicinity—is necessarily isolated. This corresponds to historians' findings about the period. Clinton, for example, has established that many white women lived lives of virtual seclusion on plantations. Clinton explains that, for many a white mistress, she was 'firmly established, indeed immured in her home by responsibilities and duties [...] besieged by domestic concerns, the white woman was cut off from society.'¹⁷² Manon's brief and pleasurable coming-out period ends with her marriage to a man whose 'aloofness' turns out not to be 'sensitivity', as she initially believes, but a kind of incivility and the sign of a dull mind.¹⁷³ Manon's disappointment with marriage provides an additional confrontation with the psychological ramifications of the conditions applied to the antebellum white mistress who has enjoyed her previous incarnation as Southern belle.

Like other belles, Manon had expected marriage to offer her fulfilment and status and she is deeply disappointed. A refrain persists in the novel: Manon finds herself repeating the words 'this is my husband,' with incredulity. From the outset Manon is frustrated by the limitations of her life, symbolised by her boredom with her 'endless sewing.' Indeed, she rejects the subordinate role of wife altogether, and she admits to feeling 'a pleasurable twinge of ownership' when she unlocks the door of the house she inherits from her mother.¹⁷⁴ In many ways Manon knows how to manage property better than her husband; she understands the cotton

¹⁷¹ This endorsement is reproduced on the book sleeve of the Abacus edition.

¹⁷² Clinton, p.165.

¹⁷³ Martin, *Property*, p.20.

¹⁷⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.5; p.7; p.100.

trade yet is unable as well as unwilling to help her husband, admitting that, 'he doesn't know I can read an account book.'¹⁷⁵ Manon's accounting ability, associated firmly with the masculine sphere, resurfaces after Gaudet's death, when Manon surprises her brother-in-law, Charles, with her knowledge of her late husband's debts. Her ability to understand accounts makes her particularly grateful for her mother's prudent management of money which leaves her with a small, independent income. Manon asserts her rights to own her own property, but this is more about assuring her self-interest than any conscious rejection of the privileges associated with a belle. It is more the case that she wishes to remove herself from her responsibilities as a wife in this in particular, recognising that only in owning her property can a woman be 'free of her detestable husband.'¹⁷⁶ As such, Manon thoroughly resists the expectations placed on women of her class. Yet her lack of insight means that she still clings to the selfishness more readily associated with the Southern belle, and it is her resistance which allows the novel to offer such a scathing interrogation of the belle stereotype.

Indeed, the three novels I explore worry the stereotype of the belle because even where there a legacy of admiration for this sometimes envied character is evinced, later fiction concedes that the belle is not fully cosseted and adored and neither should she be. The ambiguous portrayal of Sapphira calls into question the mistress's culpability in so dominating the lives of her slaves that she denies them autonomy even over their own bodies. Her stoicism and decorum may lead to admiration of Sapphira, but on balance her abuse of power diminishes and troubles such easy approbation. In the case of *Dessa Rose*, the brief portrait of Emmaline allows insight into the worst kind of belle: a woman who feigns delicacy and is exposed in her vulgar readiness to accept stereotypes about black women in her unimaginative judgement of Dessa. Because Emmaline wrongly accuses Dessa of sleeping with her husband, she could be said to deserve Dessa's physical assault upon her person, but because she holds the power it is

¹⁷⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.18.

¹⁷⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.47.

Dessa who is violently punished. In capitalising on her status, too, the former belle is culpable of taking advantage of her status to exploit her black slave woman. Ruth, in rejecting many of the expectations placed on a belle and reaching an understanding with Dessa, suggests the promise of an inter-racial sisterhood of sorts, but this possibility is presented tentatively in the novel and her complicity in slavery is never excused. And in *Property* the stereotype of the belle is vigorously troubled because Manon reveals the degree to which absolute power over another person corrupts the slave mistress. The three novels taken together present a trajectory of seeking to understand the complicity of the white mistress in the exploitation of her black female slaves. This project is approached by moving beyond the lack of explicit criticism of the white mistress in Sapphira's portrayal to a more thorough consideration of both the black slave's position and that of the mistress which the post-Civil Rights era context of *Dessa Rose* permits. *Dessa Rose* mirrors *Beloved* in its engagement with the female slave, but *Property*, written more than two decades after these two retrospective novels about slavery, extends the response to confront the white mistress's role.

Disrupting the Jezebel Stereotype

In all three retrospective slave narratives which I examine, the mistress can be considered to entertain some form of obsession with the physical and sexual attributes of her slave woman, consistent with the employment of the jezebel stereotype. This is another aspect of counterpointing in the novels, and yet the texts engage with ambiguities that disrupt this stereotype and do not simply reproduce it without question.

Sapphira's jealousy of Nancy's youth and attractiveness, in contrast to her own physical decline, is the destabilising incident that provokes much of the action of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Sapphira perceives Nancy as a threat to her marriage because of her possible attractiveness to her husband. Yet it is not so much that Nancy figures a jezebel in her actions, but that Sapphira projects her notions of black sexuality on to her slave. In

Dessa Rose, Dessa's mistress, Emmaline, is jealous of the child she believes to have been fathered by her own husband and Emmaline, and subsequently Ruth, make assumptions about Dessa's sexuality. In *Property* the effects of the jezebel stereotype come under even closer scrutiny. Manon holds Sarah responsible for the children she bears with Gaudet, despite acknowledging that Sarah despises the man. *Property* most closely interrogates in contemporary fiction that which Carby identifies as the prevailing cultural norm expressed in antebellum literature as 'two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality [that] operated in the antebellum South, producing opposing definitions for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress.'¹⁷⁷ In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, hinted at in Sapphira's ready suspicions concerning Nancy, even though she has not acted indecently, and in *Dessa Rose* the definitions are challenged too. But it is *Property* that most fully confronts white guilt, reflecting the contemporary momentum of attempting to redress past wrongs.¹⁷⁸ However, in the three novels the conflict between mistress and slave remains the cornerstone of the action and concerns in the texts, highlighted by conflicting treatment of the jezebel stereotype.

One of the central ambiguities in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl's* treatment of the jezebel stereotype is that despite Sapphira's sexual jealousy, which suggests that she is a credible rival, Nancy's portrayal is not consistent with that of the figure of a jezebel. Her actions are neither lewd nor promiscuous; instead she is associated with youth and innocence. Nancy is primarily a 'young thing.' Her limbs are slender; she has 'nimble hands,' and her cheeks are 'pale gold,' highlighting her 'pretty face.'¹⁷⁹ She is imbued with 'quiet ways and a respectful manner;' and she is not 'a girl to hold a grudge;' creating an image of a demure and gracious individual who does not conform to the brazenness associated with the jezebel

¹⁷⁷ Carby, p.20.

¹⁷⁸ In June 2009 the United States Senate unanimously passed a resolution to apologise for two and a half centuries of slavery. This was a key moment in an on-going debate that had been initiated by Representative John Conyers Jr. (D – Michigan) in 1989. For more on public apologies for past wrongs see Mitchell, pp.127-30.

¹⁷⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.32; p.61; p.18.

stereotype.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, Nancy is portrayed not as scheming, described in the text as having ‘a natural delicacy of feeling,’ but as biddable because ‘she was not courageous.’¹⁸¹ It is her lack of courage and her desire to maintain her chastity at all costs that epitomise Nancy. She threatens to drown herself sooner than give in to Martin, but when she is informed that this is ‘wicked’ by Rachel she reneges, capitulating to Rachel’s plan for her and highlighting that she is not a sexually precocious black woman as the jezebel stereotype proclaims, but that she prefers to please others.¹⁸²

But Nancy’s purity and simplicity have come under criticism too, because they are what allow her character to become diminished, subsumed by the foregrounding of the white mistress’s perspective and desires. Morrison describes her as ‘pure to the point of vapidness’ and is supported by the prevailing image of Nancy humming mildly and collecting wild flowers to make the mill house pretty.¹⁸³ Morrison also claims that Nancy is ‘rendered voiceless, a cipher, a perfect victim’ who ‘runs the risk of losing the reader’s interest.’¹⁸⁴ Certainly, Nancy’s relationship with the other black characters is generally glossed over in the novel and only her conversations with Rachel Blake are recorded in any detail. Yet, I disagree with Morrison because it is Nancy who eventually escapes and upstages her mistress. Still, Nancy’s character is emptied in that she becomes a repository for white desires and fantasies, as Mako Yoshikawa avers, claiming that, ‘Nancy’s character is not of interest because it has been upstaged by her body, which rivets the white characters’ attention and consumes their thoughts.’¹⁸⁵ This is so, and despite Nancy’s eventual escape, it is still the case that, from Sapphira’s

¹⁸⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.64; p.107.

¹⁸¹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.43; p.44.

¹⁸² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.217.

¹⁸³ Morrison, *Playing*, p.24.

¹⁸⁴ Morrison, *Playing*, p.19.

¹⁸⁵ Mako Yoshikawa, “A Kind of family Feeling about Nancy”: Race and the Hidden threat of Incest in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in *Willa Cather’s Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp.75-82 (p.79).

perspective, it is her slave's duty to fulfil the mistress's expectations by acting out these desires, again privileging the white woman's authority.¹⁸⁶

Ironically, the mistress's authority is what allows Sapphira to plan the rape of her slave, but it is her dependence on Nancy that provokes the desire to do so. This is because Sapphira's understanding of herself relies on the comparisons she makes with her slave women, also drawing on the stereotype of black women as sexually promiscuous. In Sapphira's fantasy, Nancy comes to be somehow representative of the mistress—a substitute for the old, infirm woman because of her young, uncorrupted flesh—as her mistress projects her estrangement with her failing body unto the nubile Nancy, suggesting, too, a kind of interdependence. The text draws attention to the physical counterpoints between the two women, in particular with relation to their smile: Sapphira's mouth is apt to twist into a smile that is 'arch' whilst Nancy is associated early in the novel with her 'delighted smile.'¹⁸⁷ It is Nancy's smile that is first stolen from her by her mistress, prefiguring the loss of her virginity that Sapphira plans. Nancy suffers physical abuse at the hands of her mistress: Rachel hears 'someone's cheek or arm,' being slapped by Sapphira with the hair brush, and so Nancy's body is already identified as a site on which Sapphira asserts her authority.¹⁸⁸

That the relationship between Sapphira and her slave is based on counterpointing is evident in the novel's title. Nancy's centrality is also signalled by the novel's title, deliberately reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, yet Cather's narrative is remarkably free of incident in terms of Nancy's life. In the emphasis on the white mistress's position, too, the white mistress is privileged in the text. Morrison considers the withholding of the name Nancy in the book's title. She argues that if it

¹⁸⁶ Wald argues that 'Nancy's potential rape by [Sapphira's] nephew Martin is one aspect of a slave girl's "duty" to her mistress. Insofar as she comes to mediate and even embody Sapphira's own desires, Nancy thus performs a kind of sexual(ized) labour for Sapphira, even as Sapphira imagines it is Nancy who renders *her* the victim of sexual one-upmanship'. Wald, p.93; emphasis in original.

¹⁸⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.8; p.17.

¹⁸⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.12.

had included her name it would have been ‘dangerous.’¹⁸⁹ Marilyn Mobley McKenzie summarises this by asserting that ‘withholding her name from the title reifies her in the object position and maintains the established hierarchy of power relations, in which the white woman’s identity is dependent on the black woman’s otherness.’¹⁹⁰ I agree that Nancy is figured as other in the novel in direct relation to her mistress. Here the novel draws on stereotypes because part of what distances Nancy from Sapphira is her mistress’s concern that she may deploy her nascent sexuality, for the reason that the mistress perceives black women as sexually available. Moreover, I argue, Nancy is alert to this otherness; when she comes to be treated more like ‘an untrustworthy stranger,’ Nancy becomes aware that her position is dependent on the will of Sapphira, again highlighting the differences between mistress and slave.¹⁹¹

Yet, it is arguably not so much Nancy’s otherness but her availability that attracts Sapphira. From the first time the girl is mentioned she is labelled by Sapphira as ‘my Nancy.’¹⁹² Nancy is also subjected to her mistress’s black moods, and Ann Romines points out how ‘in this pleasant house [...] abuse—or the potential for it—is behind every door.’¹⁹³ Rachel hears ‘a smacking sound three times’; this is no accidental, impulsive act: it is calculated and accompanied by Sapphira’s voice raised in anger, ‘anger with no heat, a cold sneering contempt.’¹⁹⁴

This contempt extends most ferociously when Sapphira plans to have Nancy raped. Sapphira does not so much desire Martin for herself as wish to restore her own image of herself as a desirable sexual being, and in a sense she replaces her own body metaphorically with the body of her slave girl.

¹⁸⁹ Morrison, *Playing*, p.19.

¹⁹⁰ Marilyn Mobley McKenzie, “The Dangerous Journey”: Toni Morrison’s reading of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in *Willa Cather’s Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp.83-9 (p.86).

¹⁹¹ Mobley McKenzie, p.86.

¹⁹² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.7.

¹⁹³ Ann Romines, ‘Willa Cather and “the Old Story”: *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. by Marilee Lindemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.205-21 (pp.211-12).

¹⁹⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.12.

Here, it is as if Sapphira's disdain of the girl's powerlessness is an extension of her own diminished potency, which is occasioned by her disability. The vicarious rape she envisions restores the equilibrium between mistress and slave because it enacts the site of Sapphira's own displaced sexuality. This is suggested in the text by the two women listening to Martin's footsteps at night: Sapphira is inert but safe in her room, and Nancy too lies perfectly still but this is because she is paralysed by fear of what Martin might do as she is forced to sleep exposed 'on her pallet before the mistress's door.'¹⁹⁵ Again, in relation to the stereotype of the jezebel the power rests with the mistress and the slave is rendered not so much sexually available because of any kind of promiscuousness on her part, but because she has been exposed deliberately by her mistress.

The slave's absolute availability is exactly what *Dessa Rose* contests. Unlike Nancy, who remains passive for most of the text, Dessa struggles violently against physical subjugation. Although she is defined as property, being designated as a 'valuable possession', Debra Walker-King rightly identifies that she is simultaneously described as 'dangerous.'¹⁹⁶ Arguably, Dessa becomes dangerous in direct response to being taken for a jezebel and in this her portrayal confronts the stereotype directly. She attacks Emmaline because it is her mistress's jealousy that has led to the death of Dessa's lover, Kaine. The attack is precipitated by Emmaline's accusation that Dessa is her husband's 'slut' and the child she has conceived with Kaine is her husband's 'bastard.'¹⁹⁷ But Dessa's response means that the perceived danger she poses challenges the jezebel stereotype because she is portrayed not so much as a sexually voracious black woman, especially after she instigates a violent escape attempt, but as a threatening force. Despite being subjected to physical violence, whipped and beaten and chained in a coffin to be sold away from her home, Dessa does not submit to white authority.

¹⁹⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.195.

¹⁹⁶ Debra Walker-King, *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p.135.

¹⁹⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.41.

Her resistance is elucidated by the moniker 'Devil Woman', which the slaves later apply admiringly to Dessa.¹⁹⁸

Nonetheless, *Dessa Rose* probes more deeply into *Sapphira and the Slave Girl's* exploration of the dependence of black identity upon white prejudice because it complicates this notion by scrutinising it from the slave's perspective. When she first catches sight of Ruth, Dessa believes her to be an apparition: she describes 'the hair pinned carelessly on top of her head, orange tendrils hanging around the pale blur of the face.' Naturally, Ruth's face is blurred because Dessa is slowly regaining consciousness, but the word 'blur' is also suggestive of the unknowability of the white mistress for the slave at this point in the narrative. She admits that 'she had never seen a white woman so close—the fine red-gold fuzz on the top lip, the lines radiating from the corners of the eyes [...] so much detail that she could almost think it real,' and the incongruity of Dessa's experience also contributes to the strangeness of the scene. None of Dessa's experiences allow her to think of a white woman as beneficent or even in neutral terms and she responds to Ruth with 'fear and loathing' in the beginning, and she thinks the woman must be 'strange in the head' to have allowed herself a close association with a black woman and her child.¹⁹⁹ Arguably this is because she too is trapped by the expectations and constraints of the slave system. And yet Dessa's perception does change as she comes to know Ruth and this is prefigured by her use of rhetorical questions such as 'a white woman—is that your enemy?'²⁰⁰ The questions imply a degree of openness, not present in the historical context of Cather's novel, which is seen most clearly in the way in which Dessa and Ruth are able to move beyond the stereotypes that limit the perspectives of black and white women in relation to each other and is reflective of the dialogue opened by Civil Rights era concerns with equality.

¹⁹⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.21.

¹⁹⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.82; p.84; p.97; p.115.

²⁰⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.83.

In *Dessa Rose* neither of the women is prepared to give up their objectified view of the other immediately, however, and the novel troubles stereotyping here in the portrayal of their gradually increased understanding of each other as more than types. Initially Dessa holds to her original prejudices, for example asserting, ‘that’s why we not supposed to look in white folks’ eyes,’ because, she claims, ‘there was only emptiness in them.’ From Dessa’s first arrival at Sutton Glen, Ruth’s plantation home, it is whiteness that she fears: the expression ‘the white woman’ is emphatically repeated in every sentence, epitomising her objectification of Ruth. Being in a white bed, both literally and figuratively, makes Dessa feel lost, evinced by her reflections on the strangeness of her present situation: she imagines that ‘she was the one who was missing; she had been sold away.’²⁰¹

Dessa’s surroundings are incongruous, not just because she is as yet unfamiliar with this plantation, but because she feels powerless by virtue of feeling misplaced. Her description of Ruth warrants attention, too. Dessa notes that ‘her face was very white and seemed to radiate a milky glow; her mouth was like a bloody gash across it.’ Later, using the refrain, this metaphorical connection between the threatening lash and the ‘gash’ of Ruth’s mouth is extended with the additional comparison between ‘the white woman’s mouth’ and ‘an open wound across the milky paleness of her face.’²⁰² Dessa’s conditioning as a slave means that what she sees in Ruth is the threat of violence, and this is symbolised, too, by the term ‘wound.’ Yet this word also evokes the violence that Dessa has perpetrated against a white woman, and seeing Ruth she may well also remember her attack on Emmaline, conflating her expectations of white women into an objectified set of preconceptions.

More than objectifying Dessa, and similar to Sapphira’s response to Nancy, Ruth becomes obsessed with this slave girl: she is compelled by ‘something about the girl, her face.’ Ruth watches her intently and wonders about her, trying to elicit information about her from the other former

²⁰¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.49; p.86.

²⁰² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.86; p.88.

slaves.²⁰³ This obsession is most vividly manifested in the incident in which Dessa wakes to find herself in bed with Ruth. This scene is not primarily erotic, but the mixture of emotions is heady. Dessa is ‘almost suffocated in her terror.’ She hears Ruth breathing, commenting upon the ‘breathing, punctuated by a drawn-out sigh of utter satisfaction and the small, fragile bundle that nestled at her spine.’²⁰⁴ The ‘bundle’ is Dessa’s newborn, and Ruth’s obsession seems to extend to him.²⁰⁵ This makes Dessa doubly uneasy but Williams’s novel also proceeds to interrogate the white mistress’s motives more fully, by exploring Ruth’s feelings. Ruth is taken aback when she sees hatred in the slave’s eyes, and her reaction is a wish to reassert her power; she admits that ‘she wanted to see that look banished from her face.’²⁰⁶ The conventions governing the power dynamics of slavery mean that Ruth is initially unable to comprehend a black woman having autonomy or an autonomous view of herself; this is arguably why she feels the implicit need to control the slave woman by circumscribing the physical boundaries in which Dessa lives, confining her to the quarters of her own bed in this instance. Ruth’s obsession and desire to control Dessa are captured forcefully in the image of her ensnaring the girl in her red hair:

Dessa knew the white woman nursed her baby; she had seen her do it. It went against everything she had been taught to think about white women, but to inspect that fact too closely was almost to deny her own existence. That the white woman had let them stay—even that was almost too big to think about. Sometimes it seemed to Dessa that she was drowning in milky skin, ensnared by red hair.²⁰⁷

Indeed, both slave and mistress are troubled by self-perception almost as much as by their mutual perplexity in terms of understanding one another.

More than simply contesting the application of crude stereotypes, the novel’s presentation of Dessa and of Ruth opens questions about autonomy that consider the black female slave’s and her mistress’s senses of their own identities. In words that echo Kaine’s explicit and Dessa’s implicit criticism

²⁰³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.95; p.91.

²⁰⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.114.

²⁰⁵ For my exploration of Ruth’s relationship with the infant Desmond see pp. 181-185.

²⁰⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.97-8.

²⁰⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.117.

of Emmaline, Ruth dismisses the sobriquet of Dessa as 'Devil Woman', saying, 'what could there be to fear in this one little sickly, coloured gal?' But it is Dessa who asks one of the novel's central questions about identity and authority: 'What good was that white skin anyway?' ²⁰⁸ These questions become more than rhetorical in that they address fundamental aspects of power in the novel, which are reconsidered as the two women re-evaluate their respective roles in relation to each other. I am in agreement with Jocelyn Moody that Dessa, and her counterpart Sethe in *Beloved*, are both women who 'eventually gain freedom and try to reconstitute themselves,' but I would further argue that the term reconstitution also applies to the white mistress in *Dessa Rose*.²⁰⁹ Dessa's rejection of the perceived jezebel role is similar to Ruth's rejection of the expectations placed on the belle which I discussed earlier. Ruth's actions in relation to Dessa in the novel lead to her setting aside the authority that her white skin confers and she reconstitutes herself as Dessa's 'friend,' and not her mistress.²¹⁰ *Dessa Rose* goes further than *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in troubling the jezebel stereotype, but it is in *Property* that the stereotype is even more fully contested.

Property offers a more penetrating exploration of the effects that accepting this stereotype has upon the white mistress and her relationship with her slave. Manon feels vindicated in believing her slave fulfils the stereotype of sexually precocious black woman because children are the result of Sarah's relations with Gaudet, and so her perceived guilt appears evident to her mistress. Their ensuing mutual antipathy reflects Sally McMillen's observation that, historically, 'aside from the oppression inherent in slavery, miscegenation was probably the issue that most inhibited bonding between white and black women.'²¹¹ Although Manon can accept that Sarah hates Gaudet too, she cannot bring herself to share allegiance with her. Thus, the one woman who might have been her ally in their shared enmity towards Gaudet is instead situated as her adversary. Manon believes she understands Sarah, imagining 'she wishes us both dead,' yet she makes

²⁰⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.93; p.47.

²⁰⁹ Moody, p.641.

²¹⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.230.

²¹¹ McMillen, *Southern Women*, p.26.

no attempt to understand Sarah's plight from her point of view.²¹² Here, too, the novel is in line with historical findings. Fox-Genovese notes that 'many slaveholding women understood that abuses of sexuality and power could be directly linked to slavery but had difficulty understanding that the main victims were the slaves.'²¹³ Manon's narcissism prevents her from obtaining solace through allegiance, but it also suggests the novel's admission of guilt, precisely because Manon shifts the blame for all of her misfortunes not only to her husband, but also to the woman she regards as an egregious embodiment of the jezebel.

Manon's guilt is foregrounded in this counterpoint between mistress and slave because any sympathy that may be engendered by the white mistress's unenviable position is rendered problematic by her vindictive extension of blame to her slave, Sarah. The fates of Manon and Sarah are tied together as they both suffer because of a code that tacitly allows a white master sexual access to his female slaves, but Manon has at least some say in what happens to her body whereas Sarah has not.²¹⁴ From the beginning of her marriage Manon is alert to the 'blow' to her happiness dealt by her aunt's gift of Sarah, because she realises quickly that her own youth and good looks are no protection against the 'temptations' that Sarah presents. The narrative reveals that Sarah's 'appearance was pleasing, tall, slender, light-skinned, neatly dressed, excellent posture.'²¹⁵ This description, deliberately reminiscent of a bill of sale, points up Sarah's assets but also her vulnerability; as an attractive woman she is at the mercy of white male attentions. It is clear, in an echo of Harriet Jacobs's pronouncement 'that which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave', that Sarah's good looks will prove

²¹² Martin, *Property*, p.67.

²¹³ Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p.366.

²¹⁴ The simultaneous residence of Sarah and Manon on the plantation echoes the arrival of Always and Sue, remarked upon by the slave Poon, who makes the observation that 'a new wife and a new pretty nigga woman,' meant that 'this house gonna hold hell,' in J. California Cooper's *Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p.95.

²¹⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.20; p.22.

problematic for both women precisely because of the influence of the jezebel myth.²¹⁶

Moreover, in Manon's treatment of Sarah the novel foregrounds white guilt not only in its exploration of the jezebel stereotype but in its interrogation of Sarah's status as property, developing the trajectory of the novels I examine. Like Till, Nancy and Dessa, Sarah is denied the right to pursue relationships of her own choice. On two separate occasions Sarah is forbidden from marrying a black man. While living with Manon's aunt, Lelia, a free black builder, Monsieur Roget, asks to buy Sarah so that he may marry her. Permission is refused, and worse, she is beaten by Manon's uncle as he is 'enraged' by her legitimate desire for a black man. Later she suffers another beating for the same perceived offence as she conceives a child with Bam, the butler on the Gaudet plantation. He is subsequently whipped and then sold along with her son. But it is the white mistress in *Property* who is most vindictive towards her slave. Aunt Lelia questions Manon about why she does not sell Sarah if she finds her so troublesome, but Manon insists that Sarah 'suits' her. Manon's attitude is intriguing and suggests that Sarah's hatred of Gaudet makes her presence somewhat gratifying to Manon, whilst the blame Manon attaches to her means she must also suffer Manon's revenge. Indeed, Manon is determined to hold on to Sarah as her own property. She even refuses to sell her at a considerable profit to Monsieur Roget, saying 'I am going to considerable expense to recover what is mine, by right and by law, and recover her I will.' This vindictiveness implies that it is a desire to punish Sarah by subduing her attractiveness that most motivates Manon.²¹⁷

However, the novel's interrogation of owning property extends beyond Manon's simple perception of Sarah as a jezebel. Her response to her slave is more complex, for not only does Manon fail to empathise with Sarah, but she refuses to see her humanity; she describes her as 'a nerveless creature', claiming 'there really is something inhuman about her.' Manon's solipsism

²¹⁶ Jacobs, p.26.

²¹⁷ Martin, *Property*, p.21; p.41; p.186.

also leads to paranoia about Sarah. Not only does she endow her slave with ‘immense vanity,’ but she also thinks her secrecy is a ‘trick’ and she imagines that Sarah wishes her dead.²¹⁸ What Manon’s lack of empathy also achieves is to silence Sarah, effectively, in the novel. This is powerfully signalled not only in Sarah’s taciturnity, but on the occasion when Manon and Sarah are occupied with their mutually despised sewing. Manon admits her ‘desire to hear [Sarah] speak’ and challenges her with ‘Why not just answer me?’ Sarah does answer her, but only with ‘one long shriek’ of fabric as she tears out a hem.²¹⁹ This silent scream can be read as a further admission of white guilt in that it directs attention to the silencing of the slaves’ voices in this text which leads to the relentless attention to the white mistress’s failings, as presented, inescapably, in her own words.

Moreover, what Manon’s first-person reflections illuminate in terms of the psychological impact of slave-owning upon her own character surpasses simple jealousy of Sarah, whom she blames for poisoning her happiness. What her reflections also suggest is her fixation upon her slave. In an extension of the theme, from Sapphira’s lingering thoughts about Nancy and Ruth’s fascination with Dessa, *Property* allows that Manon is obsessed with Sarah. This is first suggested by Manon’s admission that she keeps Sarah with her ‘on the pretence that she is of some use to [her].’²²⁰ The use that Manon has for Sarah concerns exercising her own mental agility, by trying to penetrate her slave’s inscrutability. She wonders, for example, ‘was it amusement’, when, ‘something flickered at the corner of her mouth.’ It is as if Manon finds Sarah’s secretiveness to be an affront, albeit fascinating. Manon describes ‘one of her rare straightforward looks,’ explaining that she interprets this ‘to mean [Sarah] is pleased’ and admits that trying to move from interpreting looks to conversation frustrates her, because talking to Sarah is a ‘largely hopeless enterprise.’²²¹ Even so, Manon’s reactions to Sarah are paradoxical: on one hand she places a screen in her room to avoid close contact with her slave, ‘so that [she] wouldn’t have to see her sleeping’,

²¹⁸ Martin, *Property*, p.45; p.53; p. 88; p.45.

²¹⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.59.

²²⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.6.

²²¹ Martin, *Property*, p.6; p.7.

yet she watches her obsessively, noting every gesture she makes and observing 'her wide eyes watching [her].'²²² The aspect of Sarah that most frustrates Manon is that despite her claim of ownership over Sarah, she cannot really know her as an individual at all. Because 'Sarah's face was a mask,' Manon does not really own this particular property in the way her obsession demands.²²³ Even after Sarah's eventual capture and return, Manon insists on the bond between herself and Sarah. She continues to view Sarah obsessively, as an adjunct of herself, mocking her for being presented as 'a poor helpless victim', and chiding her because 'no one asked how [she] got away or whom [she] left behind.'²²⁴ This remarkable reproach is further evidence not only of Manon's fixation upon Sarah but of her obsession with herself so that here, characteristically, much of Sarah's suffering is occluded. Sarah's suffering is appropriated, too, by being counterpointed with the damage done by slavery to her mistress.

What the trajectory of the novels' use of the jezebel stereotype achieves, then, is a re-appraisal of the veracity of the stereotype on the whole. By this, I mean that each of the novels I explore moves to excavate the prevailing preconceptions about black women as sexually promiscuous, or at least available, and also the effect of accepting this mythology on the character of the white mistress. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Nancy is not really a jezebel at all, and it is her mistress's projections of her own failing body unto the young girl that provoke Sapphira's jealousy and precipitate Nancy's attempted rape and ultimate escape from slavery. In *Dessa Rose*, the mistress's preconceptions prevail in the first instance: Emmaline is not persuaded that Dessa is anything other than a 'slut' and initially Ruth, 'who didn't believe a word' of the slaves' stories about 'lecherous' masters, associates Dessa with her image of a jezebel.²²⁵ But this novel challenges the stereotype in relation to the white mistress as Ruth reaches a fuller

²²² Martin, *Property*, pp.12-13.

²²³ Martin, *Property*, p.17. For more on the influential idea that slaves conceal their personalities by wearing metaphorical masks see Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986), pp.xiv-xv.

²²⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.208.

²²⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.91.

understanding of her slaves' autonomy and questions her own prejudices. And in *Property* the damage done to the white mistress by accepting the stereotype of the sexually precocious black woman is revealed more fully. Manon is obsessed with Sarah, extending this aspect of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and *Dessa Rose*, but more than this, her inability to perceive the damage done to her slave by miscegenation means that she loses the opportunity to find an ally. The implication of this teleological structure is that it is possible to identify a move away from tacit acceptance of the stereotype, or at least failure to question it, to a point at which interrogating the myth of the jezebel serves to implicate the mistress sooner than condone the slave, in line with the post-Civil Rights project of debunking racial stereotypes.

Troubling the Mammy Stereotype

Although the white mistress may often have relied on the counterpoint between herself and her black slave to define her own sexuality, she relied on black women in a different capacity in the form of the mammy. Each of the novels I explore invokes this stereotype, but each of the retrospective narratives also questions the concept of the mammy. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Till fulfils the function of mammy. She is close in age to her mistress and Sapphira relies upon her for comfort and support, so that at first this literary version upholds the stereotype to some extent. In *Dessa Rose*, conversely, the mammy's function becomes contested from the outset. Dessa insists that 'Mammy' is her mother, Rose, and that, at any rate, mammy is not anybody's 'real' name.²²⁶ This perplexes Ruth because for her mammy is the servant who has been with the family since she was a child. Yet the conflict between Dessa and Ruth over her mammy acts as part of the education of both women. Ruth's reflection on her relationship with her mammy situates an arc in the development of her character. I explore how

²²⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.119. This sentiment is echoed in J. California Cooper's *Family* when Sun rebukes Loretta for referring to Clara as a mammy. She says: 'My mama wasn't no mammy. She was my motha'. *Family*, p.44.

her fear that her mammy may just have served her out of duty and not love acts as a catalyst for genuine empathy, because she comes to accept that her slaves have their own emotional lives and aspirations. Although Dorcas, Ruth's mammy, has died before the action of the novel, the text makes clear her central role in managing the household, which reflects that of Till in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.²²⁷ In *Property* the roles of jezebel and mammy are conflated in the character of Sarah; as well as being framed as her mistress's sexual rival, she is a vital member of Manon's household and performs the material function of a mammy, but, significantly, she does not offer the emotional support associated with this character. I explore how *Property*, the most recent text, most fully troubles the role of mammy in retrospective fiction about slavery.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* it is arguably not the young Nancy, as the novel's title suggests, who is the most fitting counterpoint for Sapphira, but her near contemporary, Till. Till's sense of self in the novel appears to be based almost entirely on her relation to Sapphira and the Dodderidge family. Whilst the novel does not reveal evidence of Till receiving physical punishment, it is clear that her sexuality becomes the property of her mistress, in that it is Sapphira who decrees that she will marry a 'capon' man, Jeff, who has been emasculated by age and disability.²²⁸ This is a deliberate strategy so that family life will not distract Till from her duties. It also demonstrates how mammy is a misnomer here, because after Nancy's birth Till is forbidden from mothering more children of her own. In her marriage, as in all things, Till is faithful to her mistress's wishes. This is reminiscent of Gwin's observations about the parasitical nature of white women's relationship with their female slaves:

Most of these white women in life and literature see black women as a colour, as servants, as children, as adjuncts, as sexual competition, as dark sides of their own sexual selves—as black Other. They beat black women, nurture them,

²²⁷ Other fictional examples of a mammy who effectively runs the household include Sarah in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Lally in Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House* (1953).

²²⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.43.

sentimentalise them, despise them—but they seldom see them as individuals with selves commensurate to their own.²²⁹

In dictating the terms of Till's marriage, Sapphira does not consider the personal desires of Till or imagine that she will have an individual perspective. Neither at any point does she seem to question Till's motivations or ask her what she would prefer, and this highlights the degree of counterpointing between mistress and slave, because they differ completely in terms of freedom of choice, despite the fact that their lives revolve around each other.

Moreover, Till seems devoted to Sapphira just as Sapphira relies on her, and this interdependence is what most characterises their relationship. It is also troubling in relation to Till, because not only does she represent the mammy caricature, but in her steadfast fidelity she acts to soften the guilt accorded to the white mistress, in that at points her loyalty seems voluntary and not the result of being in bondage. Till does appear to enact the mammy stereotype, in particular because not only is she the perfect embodiment of the faithful servant, but her body also takes on the physical demands of her mistress. For example, Till's ministrations 'comforted' Sapphira, and she relies on Till's 'promptness' and 'sympathy.'²³⁰ Till's role as an actual mother is subsumed by her role as Sapphira's servant: she sees Nancy as arriving in her world 'by accident', but her relation with the Dodderidges she sees as 'one of the fixed conditions you were born into' and she believes her servitude to be her 'natural' place, one that she has a duty to 'value.'²³¹ The use of the word 'value' is pointed because of its association with property, meaning there is an inherent irony in Till's valuing her servitude when she is the material property of value in this relation.

Till's consent allows Sapphira to apply the expectations placed on a stereotypical mammy, in much the same way as she views Nancy as a potential jezebel. Indeed Till colludes with the ideas of status in her society

²²⁹ Gwin, p.5.

²³⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.110.

²³¹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.219.

and is a pragmatist. She likes people ‘of some account,’ and she herself behaves with ‘perfect dignity.’ Till’s collusive dignity extends to her quiet acceptance of Jeff as a husband, even though ‘it was by no will of hers.’²³² Unlike Nancy, Till accepts her mistress’s white mandate, which allows her to dictate the sexual, or marital, partners of her slave women. It is her compliance in most things that troubles critics of the novel. Morrison claims that Till’s characterisation is one of the factors that make the novel ‘stretch to breaking all narrative coherence.’²³³ I argue, however, that Till’s obedience is in fact part of her resistance. She gives the appearance of docile acceptance of the mistress’s will, yet she also employs silence as a strategy of resistance. It is she who does not reveal the truth of Nancy’s parentage. This I read as a deliberate omission, rather than an evasion on Cather’s part. Till is somewhat characterised by her silence. Not only is she determined to take ‘satisfaction’ in her work, but she makes the best of things in general. ‘She would never admit that it was damper [in Back Creek] than elsewhere’, for example, but it is the admission that Till withholds, not necessarily the recognition that the weather is uncongenial.²³⁴ This use of silence as resistance questions the assumption that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* conveys the mammy figure as exclusively servile and grateful. Nevertheless, it does complicate the reading of the stereotype because Till’s acceptance of her position serves to valorise the role of mammy.

Morrison’s concern with the characterisation of Till surpasses her embodiment of the mammy figure: she describes her as ‘naturally dead’, in her lack of outrage at Nancy’s plight and her seeming lack of interest in her daughter’s fate.²³⁵ But, it is worth reflecting that it is the unreliable Bluebell who suggests Till’s lack of maternal concern, when she reveals, ‘An Till ain’t spoke her name, nuther,’ and Bluebell who ventures the opinion ‘seem like Till don’t miss her gal much.’ Instead of being indifferent, Till is grateful to Rachel for her intervention on Nancy’s behalf. Till even breaks her own

²³² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.72; p.34.

²³³ Morrison, *Playing*, p.23.

²³⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.69.

²³⁵ Morrison, *Playing*, p.21.

cherished protocols, brave on her part, yet decorous on her own terms, because 'she met Mrs Blake with such warmth as she seldom betrayed and called her by her given name.'²³⁶ She says thank you to Rachel and concedes, 'if she's up there with the English folks, she'll have some chance.'²³⁷ On Till's terms of reference, based on her ideas of social hierarchies, Nancy has not only been rescued but also given a wonderful opportunity to better herself as a housekeeper, and this satisfies her maternal expectations for her child. Nevertheless, the loss of Nancy allows Till to devote the remainder of her life to Sapphira and in this their interdependence is certainly achieved. This is one of the most problematic aspects of the novel in relation to the mammy stereotype, because Cather does not linger on Till's feelings, privileging the white mistress's perspective. This too supports the idea that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* does not challenge the stereotype of the mammy but instead blithely presents the damage that slavery does to motherhood, yet without making this a central concern of the narrative.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl certainly draws on the racially defined mammy, but it also complicates this stereotype through the representation of the counterpoint between the mistress and her devoted servant. Because the identity of the mistress depends on her slaves almost as much as the identity of the slaves is forced upon them by their subjugation under slavery, Cather's novel reinforces a sense of interdependence between mistress and slave. Gwin puts it succinctly when she argues that 'each is only half a self.'²³⁸ In their understanding of their physical and sexual relations but also in their sense of duty and belonging, both the mistress and the slave woman fulfil roles that depend upon them occupying their socially sanctioned places within the institution of slavery. Moreover, in its representation of the abuse of power, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* complicates simple interpretations of complicity: Sapphira's obsession with

²³⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.244; p.248.

²³⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.249.

²³⁸ Gwin, p.11.

her slave women and their interdependence on each other challenge any straightforward readings of the story of slavery here.

Dessa Rose also allows a consideration of the interdependence between mistress and slaves that further troubles the mammy stereotype. Initially, Ruth is not too far removed from Sapphira, both in her image of herself as beneficent, and in her dependence on her servants, whom she believes ought to be faithful. In relation to Ada, Harker and the other fugitives, she feels the slaves should be grateful to her for her lassitude: 'they should thank their lucky stars she was a kind hearted person.' Yet she inserts a note of threat to reassure herself of her own authority, belying this kindness, remarking that Ada should be thankful that Ruth does not return her to her 'people.'²³⁹ Ruth's dependence on her slaves is most clear, however, in her relationship with her former mammy. Ruth considers her mammy, who dies shortly before the action of the narrative, to be firmly one of *her* 'people' and had become used to relying on her, reassured by her knowledge; for example, she 'had no clear idea of geography and was calmed by Mammy's confidence.' Mammy, the novel reveals, was the real power in the household, shoring up Ruth's hopes about her missing husband because 'her calm certainty that he would return bolstered Rufel's own faltering beliefs.'²⁴⁰ Ruth's thorough loyalty is undermined by underlying doubts over whether her mammy is just keeping Ruth quiet, quite certain that Bertie is not coming back, because this is in the best interest of *her* 'people.' Thus the stereotype of the utterly devoted mammy is troubled, challenging the basis of Ruth's dependence.²⁴¹

Ruth does depend on her mammy, even after her death, and it is only her confrontation with Dessa over mammy's identity that makes her question her understanding of her former slave in relation to herself. This confrontation is pivotal also in terms of reframing the relationship that emerges between the two women. Ruth admits that 'nothing in the days

²³⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.70; p.90.

²⁴⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.110; p.112.

²⁴¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.90.

and weeks since mammy's death had filled the silence where her voice used to live,' acknowledging that without her mammy's black voice, Ruth's white world seems empty.²⁴² Mammy has been silenced by death and Ruth's attempt to revise her memories is fraught with pain. It is partly this pain that Dessa accesses when she confronts Ruth over her mammy's identity. In the first instance, they talk at cross purposes, each preferring to hold to her own concept of who 'Mammy' is, with Dessa deliberately goading Ruth:

"You don't even know Mammy's name?"

"I do so."

"Mammy ain't nobody's name, not they real one."²⁴³

Dessa's response is to start on 'the names of the dead,' making a recitation of the names of all her siblings, because her mammy, her real mother Rose, has left her in no doubt about her maternal heritage, but Ruth's heritage is confused because of the artificial 'mother' provided by slavery's tradition of the mammy servant. At first, Ruth reacts angrily to Dessa's jibe. She is mortified and her response is to try to re-establish the old power dynamic; the narrative records how she refers to Dessa as an 'uppity, insolent slut', remarking she 'ought to be whipped.' Yet, Ruth admits her share in the miscommunication by acknowledging that 'of course she knew they were talking about two different people,' and the confrontation also moves the white mistress towards greater understanding.²⁴⁴

In Ruth's enhanced understanding of her mammy's identity the novel engages with the complicated and conflicted set of roles and expectations played out by the mammy as servant, surrogate mother and friend, yet simultaneously slave. Ruth does try to explain to Nathan about her relationship with her mammy but finds herself ashamed by describing her as a servant. She insists that her mammy was her 'friend', but she is also 'embarrassed by her own recoil from the cherished memory.' Ruth's education is instructive; she learns from the experience and is upset when she realises the limitations of her knowledge of her beloved mammy, such as

²⁴² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.112.

²⁴³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.118.

²⁴⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.120; p.121.

the fact that 'Mammy might have had children' and it 'bothered' her 'that she did not know.' It is challenging for Ruth not to think of herself as a privileged and favoured child of her mammy; indeed she wants 'desperately to believe that Mammy had loved her not only fully, but freely as well.'²⁴⁵

In admitting that Dessa's mammy's love for her children does not cancel out the possibility of her own mammy's love for herself, Ruth comes to realise that her mammy has been her surrogate mother. Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out that 'Dorcas is dead by the time of the quarrel, but even so, giving up her fantasy of being Dorcas's child is difficult for Ruth because it forces a mature recognition that Dorcas's life was not bounded by Ruth's concerns and desires.'²⁴⁶ I agree with Kubitschek and see Ruth's acknowledgement as part of her emotional growth because she learns that slaves did have the right as individuals to choose whom to love. Ruth also extends empathy to the woman whom she claims to have loved: she confesses that she 'almost felt personally responsible for mammy's pain.'²⁴⁷ Yet the use of the word 'almost' clearly qualifies this sentiment and signals the novel's reluctance to offer Ruth's transformation as an exculpation of the white mistress: to whatever degree she was loved, Dorcas lived and died a slave and Ruth, despite any remorse she may exhibit, is still complicit in slavery, even though her gradual understanding of what the term mammy means allows for the stereotype to be challenged.

And yet any redemption of the white mistress in this novel is not as simple as Ruth recognising that mammy had a life before she joined Ruth's family, or indeed a life apart from Ruth altogether. What the novel also achieves in troubling the mammy stereotype is to reclaim the dignity of the mammy character. By the post-Civil Rights era the mammy character had been subject to revisions: the sugary image of faithful servant so popular in earlier renditions, like the portrayal of Mammy by Hattie McDaniel in

²⁴⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.127; p.128; p.138.

²⁴⁶ Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p.188.

²⁴⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.138.

Selznick's film version of *Gone with the Wind*, was openly challenged.²⁴⁸ Dorcas is the given name of Ruth's mammy and she is presented favourably in the novel, but the fact that Ruth has to be informed of her name is potent because it is suggestive of all the mammy figures whose names were unrecorded by history. However, this retrospective slave narrative also admits that ambiguities persist in relation to the mammy stereotype. Dorcas does not speak in the novel: she is spoken of. For instance, Ruth notes that 'Mammy, through caring and concern had made Rufel hers, had laid claim to her affections.' Indeed, everything that is revealed about mammy is focalised by Ruth and so the text does not reveal whether Ruth's memories reflect her mammy's perspective on the same events. During her mammy's final illness Ruth playfully nurses her and she says 'both of them enjoyed the brief reversal,' yet this is according to Ruth's memory of the events and no confirmation is given.²⁴⁹ What does emerge, however, is a dignity borne out of Ruth's doubts and the very fact that she attempts to reclaim Dorcas's history insofar as this is possible.

Furthermore, Ruth's edification means that *Dessa Rose* offers a partial reclamation of the white mistress character through her reclamation of her mammy. Although, as I have already argued, Ruth's portrayal is not presented as a swift and full reversal, it is ultimately her willingness to face up to the fact that black people could not be coerced into affection that allows her to grow emotionally. For a while she persists in pronouncing judgements on the slaves as if this is her prerogative; for example, she speaks of Ada as 'presumptuous', acknowledges a 'certain reserve' in Harker and complains of Annabelle's 'slowness', yet over time Ruth comes to accept that they are entitled to their own emotional interactions that are not dependent on her desires or her will. But it is her re-appraisal of her mammy's rights to her own emotions that best depicts Ruth's emerging enlightenment: her realisation that their whole relationship may have been

²⁴⁸ For more on the controversy over the portrayal of the mammy character since the 1960s see Hazel Carby, 'Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery', in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.125-43 (pp.132-3).

²⁴⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.147; p.129.

one-sided is bitter for Ruth and she is chastened, admitting that ‘truly such ignorance was worse than grief.’

Ruth also has a moment of paranoia, in some respects echoing Sapphira’s loss of confidence, which shows how the stability of any relationship under slavery is always under threat of fracture. She wonders if mammy changed her name to Rufel as an act of malice, asking herself if ‘what she had always thought loving and cute’ was actually ‘only revenge, a small reprisal for all they’d taken from her?’²⁵⁰ But in some ways this lack of confidence on Ruth’s part serves to highlight the distance between the mistress and her slave, revealing that she has learnt to see the slaves as individuals and much more than simply people who fulfil prescribed stereotypical roles. In this the white mistress, whilst never exonerated for her complicity in slavery, is at least reframed more sympathetically.

Property, however, allows no such amelioration of the white mistress’s portrayal in relation to her mammy: Manon’s relationship with Sarah is subject to implied criticism throughout the novel. In Manon’s estimation Sarah represents both jezebel and mammy, but in much the way that the novel contests the jezebel in relation to Sarah, *Property* also problematises the figure of the mammy through the character of Sarah. Just as Ruth relies on her mammy, so Manon relies on Sarah, but more than this, Manon is fixated upon her slave. Oates reads Manon’s obsession with Sarah as a leitmotif in the narrative and argues that Manon is ‘unwittingly in love with Sarah’ and that her actions are motivated throughout by this ‘thwarted passion.’²⁵¹ I do not find this argument entirely convincing because there is little evidence that Manon wants Sarah’s devotion and much to suggest that she wants to dominate her slave, but there are certainly tensions between mistress and servant that deserve to be explored. The context of sexual tension between Manon and Sarah can best be interrogated by considering one key episode in the novel: this is the scene in which Manon abuses her

²⁵⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.133; p.129.

²⁵¹ Oates, p.139.

slave by forcing Sarah to suckle her.²⁵² The mistress, observing her servant, notes in a single, stand-alone sentence that 'she was enormously still.' When Manon looks up and sees a drop of white milk on Sarah's dark nipple, she reflects on the 'bargain' that she imagines Sarah must have struck with Gaudet: she is able to keep this baby because she can give him not only children but 'pleasure.' Manon wishes to emulate her husband's actions and she recalls that she 'dropped' to her knees before her slave resting her hands 'upon her wrists' and then 'guided the nipple to [her] lips and sucked gently,' although soon the gentleness gives way to further 'deeper' sucking.²⁵³ Despite Manon's admission that she 'struggled not to swoon,' her exploitation of the putative role of mammy as nurturer suggests much more about the perverted nature of power than about sexuality.

The incident takes place shortly after the death of Manon's own mother and she is feeling bereft, but the use of her slave as surrogate mother in such an abusive manner draws attention to the corruption of mother-child relations that exists within the mammy role. The milk is of course directly associated with Sarah's status as a mother and with sustenance; it is symbolic of her only power and this is what Manon wants to deny Sarah. Any erotic reading of the text is further denied by *Property's* self-conscious literary echo of *Beloved*.²⁵⁴ This scene is clearly reminiscent of the attack on the slave Sethe by Schoolteacher's nephews in Morrison's text. In this episode Sethe is held down and forced to suckle the young men in an act of pure abasement; here too the emphasis is on stealing the vital force of the slave woman's milk, as well as degrading her. Certainly both scenes enact a sexual violation of sorts, but this is overlaid by a violent metonymic annihilation of the woman as mother, as life-giver. When she places Sarah's breast in her mouth and sucks the milk into her own throat, Manon enjoys

²⁵² It is noteworthy that the scene in the novel that has received most critical attention is omitted completely in the abridged audio version produced by Orion Publishing Group in 2004. This omission may be occasioned by the publisher's perception that book group readers would be uncomfortable with one woman's sexual abuse of another, or because audiences may not have been prepared to face up to such a candid admission of the white woman's guilt in relation to slavery.

²⁵³ Martin, *Property*, p.80; p.81.

²⁵⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, pp.68-70.

not lust for Sarah, but revenge upon her husband: it is his experience that she wishes to emulate. Indeed, there are echoes of her wedding night when Manon recalls her husband's feverish assault on her in violent terms. She describes her own breasts as 'so kneaded and sucked upon I feared they would be blackened by bruises.' In an ironic reversal, Manon blames her own mother for the unpleasantness of her wedding night because 'her entire advice had been the word "submit".'²⁵⁵ And so the white mistress in this novel feels that she cannot obtain nurture from her mammy or her mother.

Manon imputes her initial feelings in response to Gaudet's sexuality as 'helplessness.' But this word is used deliberately to foreshadow her assault on Sarah just before it takes place, when Manon declares, 'I looked around helplessly.'²⁵⁶ From Manon's narrative perspective, it is as if feeling helpless precipitates her abuse of Sarah, making her act to assert her authority and again linking it more to power than to lust. It is indeed helplessness that she seeks to provoke in Sarah by this act of debasement, not some sort of personal sexual release as suggested by Oates. Moreover, what Manon also seeks is the solace that Sarah denies her and that she attempts to coerce, and in this the incident also highlights the dependence of the mistress on her slave. In sucking milk from Sarah, Manon imbues her with the role of the mammy she never had. Not only does she receive succour like a child, but she negates the jezebel in Sarah by transforming her into the de-sexualised mammy.

Sabine Broeck considers *Property* in her attempt to uncover the strategies employed by slave-holders in order to 'compensate for the psychological compulsion to embody white domination.'²⁵⁷ She explores briefly the motivation behind Manon's actions in this particular scene. Broeck argues that Manon secures her own gendered place by denying Sarah hers:

²⁵⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.164.

²⁵⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.164; p.80.

²⁵⁷ Sabine Broeck, 'Property: White Gender and Slavery', *Rac(e)ing Questions III*, <www.genderforum.uni-koeln.de/racing3/article> [accessed January 2008], p.4.

The slave literally in this scene is an un-gendered breast to fulfil the white woman's dreams both of power, physical comfort of body nurturance—which seems to be an ingenious signification on the hundreds of scenes of black mammies feeding whites in American cultural memory.²⁵⁸

Whilst I agree with Broeck that this incident troubles the mammy stereotype, and that it is more about power than sexual gratification, I would also extend the critique to imply a re-gendering of Manon. Manon again inserts herself in the masculine sphere of property-owner through her fierce exploitation of Sarah's capacity as "breeder."

The scene is doubly uncomfortable in that not only does it uncover the horror of the slave's degradation, but it also forces readers of the text to confront the feelings of the abuser. Manon's reaction, too, empties the scene of eroticism. She is somewhat detached, describing Sarah's breast as 'lighter than [she] would have thought', and although she records that she 'struggled not to swoon' this as easily evinces satisfaction at the avowal of her power over her property as any sexual gratification. The abuse of power is underscored by Sarah's inability to resist; her only response is a refusal to look or to comment. She tilts her head away as far as possible, and 'her mouth was set in a thin, hard line.' Silence is the only means of resistance open to the character of the slave here, but Manon's confessions force her actions to be confronted by readers, highlighted by Manon's resounding declaration that the incident has left her, unlike Sarah, feeling 'entirely free.' Such a realisation makes it difficult to avoid facing up to the tyranny of Manon as that belonging to a white mistress. Indeed, the incident posits a powerful reckoning: it is Manon's colour and status that allow the maltreatment to take place. The scene is interrupted by the return of Aunt Lelia, who exclaims 'you are as white as a sheet,' reinforcing the clear racial implication of her niece's exploitation of power.²⁵⁹ Manon can feel 'free' only by appropriating not only the sexuality of her slave, but the power-base of her husband, the very factors which she blames for ruining her happiness.

²⁵⁸ Broeck, p.14.

²⁵⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.82.

The use of the word 'free' draws attention to Sarah's continued bondage and means that the implicit castigation of the mistress is part of the confrontation with white guilt that this novel allows.

In each of the three novels I examine, the mistress is guilty of exploitation of the slave who occupies the mammy role in her estimation and in each case it is at least in part the sexuality or reproductive dimension of the slave woman that is misappropriated by the mistress. Hence the novels further challenge the stereotype of the mammy because these texts reconsider the idea of the mammy-figure as desexualised. In this too the novels I explore chart a trajectory of sexual abuse that reaches its apogee in *Property* when Manon forces Sarah to suckle her. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira Colbert may appropriate Nancy's young body and orchestrate her potential rape, but because she solicits Martin's role in this, she does so by a proxy, making any actual sexual abuse of Nancy vicarious on Sapphira's part.²⁶⁰ In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth becomes absorbed by watching Dessa and joins her in the bed, but this scene is not primarily erotic and Ruth's obsession with seeing Dessa's scarred lower body is motivated by a desire to see the evidence of her punishment for herself, and not by lust. But although Manon's motivation to mistreat Sarah in this way is not driven by lesbian desire, the exploitation, described in her own words, acts as an admission of the complicity of white women in the abuses of slavery. The problematic valorisation of the stereotype of the mammy is identifiable in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, but whilst this suggests that the mammy was a valuable commodity from her owner's perspective, later retrospective fiction challenges the myth that this led to the mammy feeling valued as an individual. Both *Dessa Rose* and *Property* depict the mammy character as one whose own desires are either ignored or thwarted, leading to a

²⁶⁰ Naomi E. Morgenstern, "Love is Home-Sickness": Nostalgia and Lesbian Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29 (1996), 184-205, provides a Freudian reading of the novel in which she identifies homoeroticism, seeing the novel as 'a slave narrative rewritten as the story of a lost love-object' (p.187). Morgenstern argues that Sapphira's 'plot to rape Nancy can be read either as an expression of rivalry—she wants to hurt Nancy who has come to occupy her place—or as an expression of her desire to be master and to possess the slave girl' (p.191).

condemnation of the white mistress for her part in the abuse of her supposedly cherished servant.

Resisting Racial Stereotypes

As I have argued, the white mistress's complicity is evident in the novels' attention to the ambiguities associated with the belle stereotype. The license to exploit her slaves was part of the privilege accorded to the white mistress and one of the ironies associated with the stereotype of the Southern belle. The belle was expected to be delicate, demure and devoted in all of her interactions with white people but was simultaneously allowed to be the opposite with her slaves. Part of the inherent ambiguity is concerned with the belle's image as chaste and morally pure. Gwin considers the effect of this in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, acknowledging that Sapphira's jealousy of Nancy makes her 'at once, the black woman's nightmare of the jealous cruel mistress and the mistress's view of herself as a woman of good will but trapped in a system which denies her sexuality and humanity.'²⁶¹ In this ambiguity the novel's characteristic mitigation of the white mistress is apparent, whereby the white woman, by being subject to the ideal of purity, is partly a victim of Southern values herself. *Dessa Rose* furthers this sense of the ambiguities bound up in the belle stereotype in its presentation of Ruth. Initially she recoils from the slaves and wishes to exert control over the plantation which her heritage, not only as a white woman but as a former belle and now a plantation mistress, allows. But later, as I have shown, she rejects many of the expectations of her race and class and forms a tentative friendship with the former slave, Dessa.

But if Ruth's portrayal may in some respects offer a kind of placation in relation to white guilt, through partly admitting the white mistress's complicity in embracing the exploitative possibilities of being a belle, then *Property* offers no such respite. That the confrontation with white guilt is much more comprehensive in *Property* reflects the contemporary tendency

²⁶¹ Gwin, p.14.

to begin the tentative process of apologising for slavery by at least acknowledging white culpability. The white mistress is subject to unrelenting reproach in the novel, mostly, as I argue, through the use of first person narrative. Ruth rejects the belle stereotype because she learns to recognise the humanity of the slaves; Manon rejects the stereotype too, but she turns her attention inwards. Her weakness is not due to constitutional delicacy, but to the opium which she takes to forget about her unhappiness, and this serves to highlight one of the main reasons for her culpability: her narcissism.

It is precisely the white mistress's narcissistic tendencies that the belle stereotype appears to encourage, but her solipsism also has an impact on the treatment of the jezebel stereotype in the novels I explore. This stereotype, as I have shown, is disputed and disrupted in retrospective plantation fiction. Nancy is a jezebel only in Sapphira's self-absorbed and maudlin fantasies; she is not at all sexually voracious and indeed she is the one who experiences the 'horrible feeling' that she is about to be raped by Martin.²⁶² The novel's disruption of the notion of the jezebel is reinforced in Nancy's eventual escape and return, however. It is not until the novel's epilogue that Nancy asserts herself by returning to Back Creek from her exile in Canada, both literally and symbolically, as an independent person. David Daiches observes that she is seen as more of a 'catalyst than of an active agent in her own right' and that only in the epilogue does Nancy 'emerge as someone who acts rather than as someone acted upon.'²⁶³ Nevertheless, it is the case that she transcends the role of jezebel that her mistress attempted to impose upon her, as well as the imposition of Sapphira's will, and in this the disruption is complete.

Dessa also suffers from the white mistress's ready assumption that she fulfils the role of sexually promiscuous black woman, and in the case of both Emmaline and Ruth this is exacerbated by the mistress's solipsism. Yet, *Dessa Rose* disrupts the jezebel stereotype, both by examining the

²⁶² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.195.

²⁶³ David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Collier Books, 1951), p.92.

changes in Ruth over the course of the narrative, and in devoting much of the novel to the perspective of the slave woman. *Property* also calls the stereotype of the jezebel into question. Despite the fact that Sarah does not articulate her own repulsion at having Gaudet as a lover, her antipathy is made clear in Manon's narration, as is the disruption of any possible allegiance between the two women because Manon persists in holding to the truth of stereotype. The truth of the final stereotype I have explored is also troubled in the three novels, not least because truth is a contingent term that is itself troubled by returning to the historical site of slavery as a source of fiction. The cherished ideal of the mammy, in opposition to the jezebel, is contested to some extent in the portrayal of Till in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, more considerably in the absent character Dorcas in *Dessa Rose* and most convincingly through the person of Sarah in *Property*.

In several ways *Dessa Rose* responds to Cather's novel. By intersecting the lives of a white slave mistress and a black slave woman at what proves to be a crossroads for both of them, Williams's novel explores the possibility of re-negotiating the status quo between white and black women in their antebellum context. Gone are the smug, authoritarian Sapphira and the loyal retainer, Till. Because *Dessa Rose* emerges primarily as a 'meditation on history,' and at the same time as a reaction against white fictional retellings of slavery, the novel is well placed to posit reflective questions on how the white mistress and her slaves have been represented in historical and fictional accounts, and to challenge some of the misconceptions that obtain. One of these misconceptions, as I have argued, concerns the fact that "mammy" is a misnomer. Ruth is chastened by her own ignorance about whether or not her mammy gave birth to children, and yet fearful that Dorcas may not have loved her charge, but only been bound to her by her position as a slave. Ruth's acknowledgement that she finds herself asking the question 'how could you love someone who used you so?'

illuminates how the novel troubles the fundamental notion of the loyal, caring mammy, which is in turn bound up with the stereotype.²⁶⁴

The misnomer “mammy” is also relevant to *Property* because Sarah has the child she conceives through love sold away as soon as he is weaned and yet Sarah must care for the two unwanted children she has with her master, marking the distinction between what it means to be a mother and what it means to be a mammy that the novels explore. In all three novels the application of the mammy stereotype points to the physical, sexual and emotional exploitation of black slave women and this is an inextricably troubling realisation in relation to what the texts reveal about the character of the white mistress. The white mistress’s culpability in the institution of slavery is an undeniable feature of retrospective plantation fiction’s questioning of the key antebellum stereotypes that were applied to Southern women. An understanding of white guilt emerges from the counterpointing between white and black women which these novels posit. The white mistress in each of the novels both embodies aspects of the belle and embraces attitudes pertaining to prevailing notions about the jezebel and the mammy. And yet, in each of the novels, these aspects are challenged. Instead of glibly trading on the resonance of the caricatures, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property* allow for a treatment of the ambiguities that necessarily limit any ready acceptance of stereotypes. The retrospective nature of this fiction means that whilst the record of history can be respected, the stereotypes can be re-evaluated or rejected in line with the thinking of their moment of production. This project is of itself part of a process in flux. In the case of these novels, hindsight is employed to reflect on the conflicted role occupied by the belle and on the spurious characterisation of black women as either jezebel or mammy, and this serves to forge a greater understanding of the complex dynamic at work between white and black women in the antebellum South.

²⁶⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.143.

Chapter Two

I cannot live with you -
It would be Life –
And Life is over there –
Behind the shelf.

-Emily Dickinson (Poem 640)

The White Mistress and her Family

The Myth of the White and Black Plantation Family

While the notion of family as a social unit is significant across geographical and cultural boundaries, this chapter addresses the particular considerations associated with family life on the antebellum Southern plantation.²⁶⁵ Family in slave-owning culture was constructed as a bed-rock of the patriarchal order and supported by the establishment of laws and the influence of the church. Eugene Genovese, for instance, writes of the religious justifications for slavery and the momentous influence this thinking had on the construction of family relations.²⁶⁶ He recounts how, in the case of Southern theologians,

[t]heir rhetoric of family values had its Northern equivalent, but with a decisive difference: in Southern doctrine the family meant the extended household, defined to include “servants”—dependent labourers. The familiar expression, “my family, white and black,” far from being a propagandistic ploy, expressed the essence of a worldview.²⁶⁷

It is this understanding of a bi-racial family that was adopted and enshrined in much Southern thinking and that offers a starting point for those reflecting retrospectively on the era. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese advances the view that

[i]n practice and in imagination, the idea of family bound antebellum white Southerners together by providing a compelling representation of enduring and natural ties among individuals. Family figured as a central metaphor for Southern society as a whole—for the personal and social relations through which individuals

²⁶⁵ For a brief survey of the geography of the slave states see Louis Filler, *Slavery in the United States* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), pp.17-19.

²⁶⁶ For more on the most influential arguments in favour of Biblical justifications for slavery see Thornton Stringfellow, ‘A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery’ (Virginia, 1841) and Howell Cobb, ‘A scriptural Examination of the Institution of Slavery in the United States’ (Georgia, 1856), reproduced in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, ed. by Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), pp.136-167.

²⁶⁷ Eugene Genovese, *The Slaveholder’s Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought 1820-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p.44.

defined their identities and understood their lives [...] Thus the slaveholders' ubiquitous phrase 'our family white and black', emphasised the persistence of the metaphor of family as an appropriate representation for various social relations.²⁶⁸

Retrospective fiction attends to the established expectations of family life but has a tendency to destabilise the predominant norms. This is achieved by challenging patriarchal authority in the form of the father figure. The novels also investigate the role of the husband, partly through exploring the complicated sexual relations in the plantation setting, and consider the influence of the notion of the white and black family on the next generation. This chapter examines these particular reconsiderations of family life as they apply specifically to the antebellum white mistress in retrospective plantation fiction.

In many ways the image of the ideal Southern family in this era was governed by a sense of obedience and order. The head of the household was a figure of ultimate authority and respect. As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, obedience was a central tenet of the code of femininity and white daughters were expected to defer—in everything—to their father's will. Jean Fagan Yellin provides a commentary on such a daughter in her biography of Harriet Jacobs. Jacobs's original white mistress was the daughter of the man she styles Dr Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Mary Matilda Norcom. The letters of her father, James Norcom, make it clear that the worst fault in a daughter is that she would disobey her father and her absolute compliance is what he considers to be her primary duty.²⁶⁹ This mandate of absolute obedience was credited in part for the prevalent order on plantations, as exemplified by contemporary commentators. For example, George Cary Eggleston wrote a post-war memoir in 1905 on behalf of the planter elite to correct what he believed to be misapprehensions about antebellum life. He uses romanticised language to valorise the 'very

²⁶⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and her Family', in *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South*, ed. by Carol Blesser and C. Vann Woodward (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.15-31 (pp.18-19).

²⁶⁹ See Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), p.23.

beautiful and enjoyable life' in that 'ancient time.'²⁷⁰ Eggleston acknowledges that 'family pride was a ruling passion' and locates the main duties of a Southern gentleman to be that of 'keeping the estate in the family, and maintaining the mansion-house as a seat of elegant hospitality.'²⁷¹ In this, he extends the notion of the obedience of children, particularly daughters, to encompass the duties and responsibilities of the patriarch towards his family. The idea of duty is closely bound with the Southern concept of honour, crucial for the male head of the household. Of course this is where one of the major discrepancies between the white and the black 'family' members is made most manifest. Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago make this clear:

The essence of honour was personal autonomy. Autonomy, freedom, and self-sufficiency were values that characterised the political sphere, while dependency, forced submissiveness, and lack of power were characteristics of slaves and all individuals who were barred from political participation.²⁷²

Hence, not only did the only authority belong to white males, but the order presided over by the master was dependent not only on the obedience of his children, particularly disenfranchised daughters, but also of his slaves.

Yet much of this sense of order was built upon a fallacy. Retrospective fiction engages contemporary sources to undermine the notion of order, instead positing delusion and disillusionment for the father figure. Both masters and slaves were caught up in a world of hypocrisy. Masters and mistresses were concerned with the economic functions of the plantations and seeing people as property but also with their own status and sense of being beneficent. Owning slaves was prestigious and being considered a good master also conferred a degree of respect. Slaves had to deal with inconsistencies and tyranny but also had to maximise their own welfare where this was possible and take advantage of any latitude and generosity

²⁷⁰ G. C. Eggleston, *A Rebel's Recollections* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), p.27.

²⁷¹ Eggleston, p.33.

²⁷² Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago, *Slavery and Emancipation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.147.

that did exist. As Peter Parish avers, ‘the life of every slave could be altered by the most arbitrary and amoral acts.’²⁷³

This hypocrisy is most starkly realised in the myth of the benevolent slave-holder. The idea that slaves benefited from the institution of slavery and that masters were most likely to be kind in the treatment of their human property was espoused by contemporary apologists for Southern slavery. One such apologist, whose name no doubt is deliberately echoed in the name Adam Nehemiah, the representative of the patriarchy in *Dessa Rose*, is Nehemiah Adams. In 1854 he wrote *A South-Side View of Slavery*. In this work he describes the South as unique in its approach to law and resting on chivalric values. These values are echoed in Nehemiah’s aspirations in Williams’s novel, as well as in the fact that he wishes to inscribe them in a work of his own. In this the novel intervenes to challenge the idea of white male authority over the written word as much as the patriarchal right to authority in general. But in Nehemiah’s ultimate disappointment the novel also corrects assumptions of order and obedience as natural, even inherent, within the plantation system. Indeed, I argue that disillusionment is attributed to the father figure in retrospective plantation fiction as a means of contesting the notion that chattel slavery offered a benevolent, ordered society.

Another example of the deluded yet finally disillusioned patriarch is figured by Percy Gray, the father of Manon in *Property*, who might have been modelled on another Southern commentator, James Henry Hammond.²⁷⁴ In 1831 Hammond took over Silver Bluff, a South Carolina plantation with one hundred and forty seven slaves. He exemplified paternalism and attempted to impose a system of absolute authority. He also gave Christmas gifts and exhibited other types of largesse. Yet between 1831 and 1835 he records that fifty-three slaves absconded.²⁷⁵ He kept a diary which, like Percy’s

²⁷³ Peter Parish, *Slavery: The Many Faces of a Southern Institution* (Bath: Keele University Press, 1998), pp.2-3.

²⁷⁴ For more on the life and writings of James Henry Hammond see Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

²⁷⁵ Halpern and Dal Lago, p.207.

diary, is full of his ideas on slavery and includes little personal incident. For example, an 1841 entry tells of the death of a slave he describes as a 'valuable woman' owing to a breach-birth; recording that 'she was a good creature as ever lived. Her child had been dead several days.'²⁷⁶ This dispassionate, scientific approach characterises his diary, in which he also records the number of deaths in ten years as seventy eight and the number of births as seventy two. Yet a personal note of rebuke is also evident in the diary. Hammond laments these poor statistics, writing that 'one would think from this statement that I was a monster of inhumanity. Yet this one subject has caused me more anxiety and suffering than any other of my life. I have adopted every possible measure to promote health and save life, but all in vain it seems.' Again, mirrored by the depiction of Percy, he is full of self-reproach and this suggests the damage inflicted upon the master by this relentless pursuit of a corrupt system. He reflects on his so-called 'misfortune' as 'a most painful theme' that 'embitters' his life and proceeds to declare: 'I must seek some change. *Must*.'²⁷⁷ The emphasis here is echoed in Percy's final, demoralised diary entry just prior to his suicide.²⁷⁸

The idealised image of perfect familial harmony is also part of the mythology that emerged in relation to the Southern plantation, yet the double standards that prevailed, and which I discuss in the previous chapter, meant that few observers shared the idealisation. Louis Filler writes that 'many travellers and observers noted and gave force to the view that the South was no more than a "great brothel" built upon slave labour; mistresses of the great plantation houses no more than "first concubines" in the hierarchy of male-female relations.'²⁷⁹ The white mistress was at the forefront when it came to dealing with this particular form of hypocrisy. Just as daughters had to obey their fathers, women were also supposed to defer to their husbands and to offer them comfort and support. The husband's

²⁷⁶ James Henry Hammond, *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, a Southern Slaveholder*, ed. by Carol Blesser (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.72.

²⁷⁷ Hammond, p.73; emphasis in original.

²⁷⁸ Martin, *Property*, pp.93-4.

²⁷⁹ Filler, p.41.

social position depended on the virtues of his wife and the white mistress's status was largely dictated by the commercial and social success of her husband. Stevenson notes that 'experts took for granted that women should centre their lives on addressing men's needs, and that men should provide them with support and protection in return.' She establishes that the role of the mistress was to 'obey and guide, sacrificing herself in order to be the living example' of many virtues and this would in turn 'elevate her husband's performance' in matters of the world and enhance his social status.²⁸⁰ Hence, the white mistress had a defined set of responsibilities and had to place her husband first, yet without the privilege of being the sole object of his sexual attentions. The extreme representation of the South as a 'brothel' discloses the tensions associated with miscegenation and the disharmony it caused the plantation family.

One aspect of the sexual double-standard related to the disharmony brought about by miscegenation is explored extensively in retrospective plantation fiction: the degree of choice allowed to white and black women when choosing a sexual partner. Courtship was very different for belles and slave women. The rituals of courtship for the eventual white mistress were intricate and could be drawn out over many months; they included the first introduction, usually made by male member of the household and often associated with a girl's formal *debut*. *Debuts* were prestigious and highly anticipated events which took place after the completion of her education and allowed for introductions to eligible men to be orchestrated by family and friends. This period, known as the 'season' was supposed to be an enjoyable time in a Southern girl's life before the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing began. Courtship was supervised and highly structured around chaperoned events. Girls could meet their *beaux* only at church, sanctioned social functions and at the homes of socially accepted friends and acquaintances. This meant that unless the suitor was a childhood friend or indeed a cousin or other relative of the girl, the plantation mistress may not have known her partner very well before she married and went to

²⁸⁰ Stevenson, p.39.

live on a plantation, often many miles from her family. So although the white mistress had certainly more command over her choice of partner, there were still restrictions. Nevertheless, these restrictions were not nearly as stringent as those that applied to slave women making active choices, particularly if they wished to make a life partnership.

Slave romances were fraught with difficulties. From the beginning enslaved men and women had to engage in a process of confrontation and compromise with their masters. However, a system within the slave community and extended family also had to be respected. Stevenson notes that slaves had to consult family members or elders in the community and permission to form a life bond was solicited, where possible. The bonding ceremony itself varied across communities and depending on exigencies. The broom-jumping ceremony, contrary to popular belief, is not an African custom, but a pre-Christian European ritual. It possibly became favoured by slave-holders as an expedient event, subsequently to be adopted by the slaves themselves as part of their distinctive culture.²⁸¹ Slave marriages were not legal, although they were often recognised by the planters because they provided good economic sense. Children born on the plantation were added to the stock of property and the presence of children could also discourage their parents from running away. Sometimes mistresses supported the unions of personal maids and gave dresses and gifts for the broom-jumping ceremonies.²⁸² Many slave marriages were broken by sale and slave families had to be fluid as a result. Sometimes unions were forced as a kind of studding arrangement. There was the occasion of miscegenation where the child of a slave woman followed the condition of the mother into slavery, even though he or she may have been fathered by the master or one of the other white men on the plantation. These births strained relations between black men and women and between female slaves and their white mistresses.

²⁸¹ For more on slave courtship and marriage see Stevenson, pp.226-31.

²⁸² A fictional example is supplied by Mrs Garner's support of Sethe's marriage to Halle in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, pp.140-3.

Moreover, the differences in treatment of children on the plantation depended almost entirely on the status of the mother, and this aspect of family life is also explored in retrospective plantation fiction. Motherhood was regarded as a principal duty for women, white or black, and the application of this expectation for economically privileged Southern women specifically is demonstrated by Mary Chesnut. Her diary reveals the extent to which childlessness was frowned upon by her countrywomen, when she records: 'I did Mrs Browne a kindness. I told those women that she was childless now, but that she had lost three children. I hated to leave her all alone. Women have such contempt for a childless wife. Now they will be all sympathy and kindness.'²⁸³ For enslaved women the duty to have children was associated with financial necessity and their maternal role was subsumed by the needs of the white family. As I discussed in the previous chapter, sometimes white mothers nursed their own children but often the services of a black wet nurse were also invoked. The sustenance of black children was secondary in importance and, too, caused tensions between mistresses and slaves. Black children were understood as property and this understanding was reflected in how they were treated compared to the white plantation children. A famous passage from Harriet Jacobs is often cited when referring to this aspect of the white and black family: 'I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister.'²⁸⁴ Jacobs despairs for the enslaved sister, whose experience will be worse than that of her white sister, and for their loss of each other and the inevitable separations and realisations to come.

The reason for the poor treatment of the black members of the plantation 'family' remains that slaves were thought of primarily as property. This is why historians such as Willie Lee Rose have refuted the use of the term 'domestic' in relation to slavery:

[P]roslavery philosophers intended to suggest a benign institution that encouraged between masters and slaves the qualities so much admired in the Victorian family: cheerful obedience and gratitude on the part of the children (read slaves), and

²⁸³ Chesnut, *Diary*, p.20.

²⁸⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.27.

paternalistic wisdom, protection, and discipline on the part of the father (read master)[...] So, in the nineteenth century the phrase 'domestic institution' came to mean slavery idealised, slavery translated into a fundamental and idealised Victorian institution: the family.²⁸⁵

Rose draws attention here to how the notion of a white and black family was embraced as an ideal because slaves were thought of as children and not as autonomous individuals. This condition corresponds to the conditions of patriarchal power, under which all authority rests with the male, but here it is racially inflected because the power rests only with white males. Because this analogy is extended to cast light on the myth of the idealised white and black family, Rose is able to identify the irony of the misnomer 'domestic institution', precisely because the slave could not be simultaneously an economic unit of property and a valued member of the family, even if slaves were figured as children within this idealised mythology.²⁸⁶

Jane Turner Censer writes about North Carolina planter families, but her appraisal can apply broadly to the planter class across the Southern states; she is convincing when she claims that 'sentimental whites who would have been horrified to think of their own children as possessions could discuss slaves and slavery as dispassionately and calculatedly as they would cattle weights or tobacco prices.'²⁸⁷ Slaves were subject not only to harsh conditions and the arbitrary will of masters; they could be given away as gifts to children of the family who married and moved elsewhere, and they could be subject to sale at any point if the family needed extra money, or offered as surety for debts. The death of a master in particular meant uncertainty for slaves. Some masters included manumission papers for favoured slaves with their wills but many did not and slaves were subject to being separated into lots and sold, often dismantling families in the

²⁸⁵ Willie Lee Rose, 'The Domestication of Domestic Slavery', in *Slavery and Freedom*, ed. by William W. Freeling (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.21.

²⁸⁶ Rose, p.21.

²⁸⁷ Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p.136.

process.²⁸⁸ Slave children's status as property determined that their treatment differed greatly from the lives experienced by the white children on Southern plantations.

White mothers were very much viewed as teachers of their children. From the beginning they were responsible not only for the child's physical welfare but also for his or her spiritual and moral development. A plethora of improving literature guided mothers on the basis of the child as a *tabula rasa*.²⁸⁹ White children were expected to exhibit obedience and character. In boys this included understanding and adopting the code of honour and attaining a good education, including instruction in the classics, scripture and arithmetic. In girls it focussed on religious teaching but also on such accomplishments as embroidery and music. Both boys and girls were taught the importance of balancing a budget but boys had advanced lessons in economic husbandry, aimed at developing fiscal independence.²⁹⁰

The role of a white mistress as teacher extended beyond the tutelage of her children; it also included educating and disciplining the slaves on the plantation. This role proved challenging, as the following example demonstrates. Adele Petigru Allston was from Charleston. She moved to a plantation in South Carolina after her marriage to take up the duties of a mistress. Her anxieties and the advice given to her by her husband's aunt are recorded in a memoir written by her daughter Elizabeth. The memoir includes insights into the life of a white mistress in relation to her duty of care to the slaves. She complains of the difficulty posed by the expectation that she be 'always among people whom I do not understand and whom I must guide and teach and lead on like children.' She even admits that it 'frightens' her to have this burden.²⁹¹ Retrospective fiction also addresses

²⁸⁸ Censer studied 92 wills of North Carolina males and found that only eight asked executors to respect slave families in the settlement of their estates. Censer, pp.139-41.

²⁸⁹ For more on the expectations placed on southern parents see Stevenson, pp.95-8.

²⁹⁰ For more on the education of children of the planter class see Censer, pp.42-57.

²⁹¹ Elizabeth Allston Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1922), p.77.

the suitability of the white mistress character to assume the moral responsibility of teacher and guide.²⁹²

Adele's aunt's reply is revealing, illustrating that in addition to being responsible for inculcating Southern values in her own children, the white mistress was expected to act as moral guardian as well as care-giver to the slaves on the plantation. She answers, 'I grant you it is a life of effort; but, my child, it is our life: the life of those who have the great responsibility of owning human beings.'²⁹³ Her aunt also points out that 'to be the wife of a rich planter is no place for a pleasure-loving indolent woman, but for an earnest, true-hearted woman it is a great opportunity, a great education. To train others one must train oneself; it requires method, power of organisation, grasp of detail, perception of character, power of speech; above all, endless self-control.'²⁹⁴

Here, also, retrospective novels engage with history because they examine the difficulties posed for the white mistress by this near impossible dictat. Because slaves might resist her authority, the role of mistress was made difficult for the white woman in charge of the big house. Parish notes, for example, the 'various forms of sabotage, disruption, obstruction, non-cooperation, and malingering which were woven into the pattern of slave life.'²⁹⁵ These acts of resistance were occasioned by slaves' attempts to assert some form of control over their own surroundings as well as acting, no doubt, as small acts of revenge on those masters and mistresses who kept them in subjugation.

And yet, overarching the concerns of retrospective fiction with the different expectations placed upon different members of the white and black plantation family depending on their gender or race is the concern with the suffering caused to all the family members by the institution of slavery. In

²⁹² In *Kindred*, Dana deliberately tries to educate Rufus from a twentieth-century perspective because she recognises that otherwise his mother will encourage the boy to adopt racist antebellum Southern values. See Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, pp.82-8.

²⁹³ Pringle, p.77.

²⁹⁴ Pringle, p.78.

²⁹⁵ Parish, p.44.

her 1851 novel *Northwood*, Northern writer Sarah Josepha Hale expresses the widely accepted view of her countrywomen that slavery not only dehumanised slaves, but that it damaged families and individuals. One of her fictional characters, Sidney Romelee, claims that it ‘lowers the tone of morals; checks learning [and] increases the ignorance and helplessness of women and idleness and dissipation of men; in short, it injures the white race more than it benefits the coloured—so that there is an actual loss of moral power in humanity.’²⁹⁶ This loss of moral power is part of what I explore in this chapter by examining the disruption of family life on the antebellum plantation as it is re-envisioned in retrospective fiction.

Father Figures: Challenging Patriarchal Authority

The dynamics relating to the family on the antebellum Southern plantation are dominated by power. The white mistress was accorded authority over her slaves but she too ultimately had to bow to male authority. The prevalent patriarchal social order, characterised by primogeniture, dictated that all the occupants of the plantation, white and black, were subject to the authority of the master in the slaveholding family. This power base was clearly defined, and although there are examples of widows who largely managed their own properties, the cultural climate in the South reflected the dominant norm in western society in this period, with its emphasis on patriarchal power.²⁹⁷ Where the dynamic differs is of course in relation to slavery: family life on the Southern plantation did not simply follow a male-dominated order; rather, it was disrupted by the myth of the white and black family. Not only did the white mistress have to submit to her husband and devote the majority of her attentions to her children and domestic duties, but she had to come to terms with the presence of slaves and the multitudinous challenges that this posed. One of the major challenges has to do with miscegenation and the difficulty for both mistresses and slaves caused by sexual relations between white masters and their female slaves.

²⁹⁶ Sarah Josepha Hale, *Northwood: Life North and South* (New York: Harper, 1853), p.406.

²⁹⁷ For more on widows see McMillen, *Southern Women*, pp.116-118.

Another complicated aspect of family relationships is concerned with the impact of slavery on the white mistress's maternal duty of care: both black and white children were her responsibility but white children's needs were greatly privileged, which resulted in complicated emotional responses.

The three novels I consider are alert to the difficulties slavery posed for family life on Southern plantations. Primarily they conceive that slavery, whilst most immediately damaging the families of slaves, also troubled the white mistress's relationship with her own family. Moreover, the retrospective fiction I examine here serves to interrogate the family as a site of the white mistress's complicity in the institution of slavery. This means that in terms of family life the Southern mistresses in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property* simultaneously *suffer as a result of* slavery and *contribute to* the suffering caused by slavery. The daughters of the house may well have been indulged by their parents and encouraged to develop the social accomplishments that made them particularly marriageable, but girls were also raised to be obedient. The head of the household was someone to be respected and obeyed, and his decisions were final. In this section I examine how retrospective plantation fiction treats the male authority figure, because each of the novels I explore questions the role of this figure in relation to the social and emotional development of the white mistress.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira's father is mentioned only briefly when her own illness causes her to reflect that she ought to have been more charitable towards her invalid father before he died.²⁹⁸ Instead it is her husband who takes on the dual role of partner and master, although this assumption of power is complicated by Sapphira's own domineering character. In *Dessa Rose* the father figure is more properly occupied by Adam Nehemiah; although he is not Ruth's father he forcibly adopts the role of representative of white male authority in the novel. *Property* interrogates the role of the father figure intently, through the presentation of Manon's father, Percy Gray, and the relationship she has with him.

²⁹⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.104-5.

Sapphira's relationship with her family is certainly disrupted by slavery. In some regards her culpability in the abuse associated with slavery is evident, yet in her tacit acceptance of patriarchal authority the question of her guilt is troubled. Sapphira's relationship with her husband is unusual in that she claims to hold the role of 'master' in the marriage, yet this power dynamic is not completely borne out by the text.²⁹⁹ In many ways Sapphira is as much subject to the expectations placed upon white women as any other woman of her class and time, despite her overbearing personality and Henry's corresponding meekness. This equivocation is what complicates a reading of the novel that sees the symbolic function of the white mistress as simply a representative of guilt in Cather's novel: Sapphira is neither wholly culpable nor wholly a cipher in her relationships with her white family.

Sapphira is also subject to the power structure that dictates she must submit to her husband's decisions. Henry Colbert is Sapphira's social inferior; their marriage is described as a 'long step down' for the bride and its 'strangeness' is still a subject of local gossip. He is an 'uncouth' man of the mercantile class and her father's former employee. He reassures Sapphira by telling her 'You're the master here, and I'm the miller. And that's how I like it to be.'³⁰⁰ Yet, it would be an oversimplification to read this as a complete rejection of autonomy, or indeed of authority on her husband's part. In all aspects of the workings of the mill, including his governance of the slaves, Henry is in control. More importantly, it is to him that Sapphira must defer when she raises the possibility of selling Nancy. As a woman, she is subject to the property laws which dictate that all property, including human chattel, belongs legally to the male head of the household.

Sapphira is subject also to Henry's moral authority in relation to their black family. What this does is to further complicate questions about the white mistress's guilt because it shifts the moral burden on to the master. Indeed, Henry asserts moral authority, insisting that the Bible is his ethical compass. He has marked passages with the letter 'S' and actively seeks

²⁹⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.50.

³⁰⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.23; p.25; p.50.

guidance on the subject of slavery. Here, again, there is compromise because nowhere in this novel does Cather give an unequivocal denunciation of the Southern slave system, just as Sapphira's husband concedes that 'nowhere in his Bible had he ever been able to find a clear condemnation of slavery.'³⁰¹

Tomas Pollard gives a convincing account of how Henry's reading of the Bible and John Bunyan corresponds importantly with the setting of the novel in the 1850s.³⁰² This would have been a period of fierce debate between those who offered Biblical justifications for slavery and those who argued it was not condoned by scripture.³⁰³ But the portrayal of the white mistress is further troubled because Cather does not explore any moral conundrum on Sapphira's part: she does not seem to have any compunction about placing Nancy directly in the path of Martin, a plan that she has, of course, orchestrated. Although Morgenstern calls attention to the 'Sapphic pun' in the slave mistress's name and suggests that the novel may enact a kind of displaced lesbian desire on the part of Sapphira for the young Nancy, I argue that the moral burden is restored to the husband in this text, because the ultimate fate of the slaves in any household rests with the master, not the mistress.³⁰⁴ This in turn marks the novel's ambivalence about guilt because Sapphira cannot be exonerated and yet her complicity is mitigated by her concession of power to her husband's role of moral arbitration.

Despite his apparent dislike of the institution of slavery, Henry remains complicit within it, meaning that at the very least Sapphira does not bear sole responsibility for the fate of her slaves. For instance, he likes to think of Nancy as John Bunyan's character Mercy, but this is problematic, as Pollard contends. Mercy is a pilgrim who works out of goodness and is not in bondage. 'For Henry', Pollard argues, figuring Nancy

³⁰¹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.110.

³⁰² Tomas Pollard, 'Political Silence and Hist'ry in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*', in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp.38-53 (pp.43-4).

³⁰³ See note 265.

³⁰⁴ Morgenstern, pp.184-220.

as Mercy makes her ‘paradoxically a free slave.’³⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Henry plays a part in Nancy’s escape. He does not take decisive action by freely giving Rachel money or make a plan to assist the girl’s departure, but his daughter is able to take advantage of the ‘struggle’ that she perceives her father experiences. Henry is ashamed at his ‘irresolution’, and leaves money in a pocket of a coat by the window, knowing that Rachel will use it to facilitate Nancy’s safe departure.³⁰⁶ He cannot openly condone ‘making away with [Rachel’s] mother’s property’ and I agree with Pollard that this is because he is a pragmatist, and ‘heroic, open collaboration by Henry could have been legally and financially devastating for the whole family’ in the light of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.³⁰⁷ Despite Henry’s doubts about slavery and any desire he may have to abnegate responsibility, he still embraces the role of head of the household. Even conceding Romines’s assertion that he finds himself in a difficult position because he ‘is legally and financially bound to his wife’s property’, it is worth noting that he does not insist on breaking these ties by extending manumission to all of the slaves, at least while his wife still lives.³⁰⁸ In this, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* contributes to the project of retrospective fiction by allowing that the white mistress’s culpability in slavery is part of the guilt that can be attributed to the wider structure of the Southern plantation family.

Shelley Newman makes a case that it is not simply practical and legal considerations that motivate Henry’s reluctance to act decisively; despite being unable to move beyond ‘the limits placed upon him by history, Henry additionally fails to transcend the limits of his own “vision”.’³⁰⁹ The text provides more than a compelling endorsement of Newman’s claim that Henry reduces Nancy to property because he ‘capitulates to Sapphira’s ownership and surrenders his morality to an unjust law.’³¹⁰ In addition to

³⁰⁵ Pollard, p.46.

³⁰⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, P.225; p.227.

³⁰⁷ Pollard, p.45.

³⁰⁸ Romines, ‘Willa Cather and “the Old Story”’, p.212.

³⁰⁹ Shelley Newman, ‘No Place Like Home: Reading *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* against the Great Depression’, in *Willa Cather’s Southern Connections*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp.54-64 (p.60).

³¹⁰ Newman, p.61.

Henry's actual capitulation and surreptitious, rather than outright, defiance of Sapphira, the novel uses his equivocation to posit further ambivalence towards slavery. Henry has reflected that 'it was a dreary business to be responsible for other folks' lives', but the word 'responsible' is revealing: he concedes to the ideology that sees black people as dependent on the care of white people. This inner conflict is also demonstrated in his fear that Nancy might be disadvantaged by freedom and his acknowledged belief that 'Sapphira's darkies were better cared for, better fed and better clothed than the poor whites in the mountains.' This admission, and his recognition that, even so, no white man would willingly exchange his position with a slave, may reflect a historically accurate position in terms of the material benefits for slaves of remaining in bondage, because there is evidence that some poor white people lived in more extreme poverty.³¹¹ However, Henry fails to confront the moral bind of enforced servitude. Indeed, he thinks that 'nobody is altogether free.'³¹² In this insistence that all people are in some ways in bondage, the text also unsettles an outright condemnation of the white mistress, because her husband's doubts and indecision militate against an understanding of Sapphira as solely responsible for imposing suffering on her black family.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira chooses an unconventional marriage partner, who allows her a semblance of mastery in her household, but she ultimately conforms to the conventions of patriarchal power, as I have argued. Ruth's actions in *Dessa Rose* allow a challenge to patriarchy, which is seen nowhere more clearly than in her final showdown with Adam Nehemiah. He is the self-styled expert on slavery, introduced when he attempts to make a case study of Dessa in order to write a definitive manual on slave rebels. His ostensible motivation in preparing this text is to assist slave-owners, but he is also driven by a desire to insert himself into a position of authority that is denied to him by the low social class of his birth. This means that Nehemiah provides a focal point from which to observe the workings of patriarchal power in the novel. He loses Dessa after

³¹¹ See Clinton, p.17.

³¹² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.205; p.227; p.228.

her escape to Sutton Glen only to re-encounter her later when he meets with Ruth, accompanied by her band of escaped slaves, as they perpetrate their fraudulent slave-selling scheme. Indeed, the success of Ruth and the former slaves' economic zenith is highlighted powerfully by the nadir of the fortunes of Nehemiah, and it is in Ruth's definitive interaction with him that her own transformation into a woman independent of male authority is most fully realised. After Ruth has confounded Nehemiah in front of the sheriff, by vouching for Dessa and refusing him the chance of reclaiming the woman he knows to be an insurrectionist, Dessa reflects that 'Nemi was low; and I was the cause of him being low.'³¹³ This 'I' could easily be read as 'we', because it is together that Dessa and Ruth have thwarted Nehemiah and reduced his status in front of the white men he wishes to impress. By usurping his power over the property that is Dessa, and consequently finally gaining her trust, Ruth asserts a moral victory over patriarchy.

Dessa cannot understand why Nehemiah is obsessed with her. He calls her 'sly bitch' and 'lying sow', as if she has tricked him, when in fact he is a victim of his own delusions, so much so that he 'looked plumb wild.' Dessa does not understand his motivation; she is perplexed by his desire to 'track [her] down like he owned [her], like a bloodhound on [her] trail.' But his obsession makes sense in the light of his desperation to hold on to the patriarchal authority that allows him dominance over women, whether they are white or black. Ruth and Dessa's joint destruction of this power is recognised by Nehemiah when he shouts at them in front of the sheriff, saying: 'you all in this together [...] "womanhood" [...] All alike. Sluts.'³¹⁴

It is their unity that gives the women new terms of reference; Nicole King argues compellingly that 'as characters, each is able to understand the other in terms other than those offered by the white patriarchal power structure,' and this collaboration is what finally annihilates the power Nehemiah represents.³¹⁵ Nehemiah has become completely undone; the text

³¹³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.232.

³¹⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.224; p.225; p.232.

³¹⁵ Nicole King, 'Meditations and Mediations: Issues of History and Fiction in *Dessa Rose*', *Soundings*, 76 (1993), 351-368 (p.359-60).

reveals that ‘he was crazy; had to be crazy, walking round with no hose, no collar, his cuffs frayed.’³¹⁶ The signifiers of his status, in terms of his fine clothes and sense of decorum, have been reduced until he is not unlike a slave. He additionally loses his sign, in terms of his name, as McDowell makes explicit in that ‘further, Nehemiah’s own name has been abbreviated; he is “Nemi” and has *become* the reduction he would create.’³¹⁷ This enacts the opposite of what he has tried to impose on Dessa by adding an extra O to her name when he insists on referring to her as Odessa. When Nehemiah discovers that he cannot impose his will on Dessa, or on Ruth, he becomes the victim of his obsession, so to speak, because rather than assert his dominance over the women he is undone by them.

Nehemiah represents the father and husband whom Ruth rejects as well as the master who Dessa evades. In the terms of reference available to this late-twentieth-century narrative, he is an apotheosis of the worst of white male authority. Elizabeth Shultz explains that Nehemiah is ‘the general voice of white paternalism and racism, masculine patriarchy and sexism, American self-reliance and capitalism.’³¹⁸ Instead of endorsing these values, which are the values underpinning the economics as well as the ethical system of chattel slavery, and by espousing the values of kinship, the white mistress in this novel insists on her own version of capitalism, that which serves her and her extended family.

Just as Nehemiah is reduced as a person, as well as a symbol of male authority, so too is his brand of capitalism shown to fail in the novel. Williams is adroitly comic in her portrayal of this small man, who cannot see Dessa as a person. He says: ‘pray God this darky don’t die before I get my book!’³¹⁹ He exploits slavery without being a slave owner, making him the worst kind of hypocrite, because of his longing for an entrée into slave society, and it is a comic irony that this very admission is what Ruth achieves through the slave-selling scam. But it is the illogical nature of male

³¹⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.225.

³¹⁷ McDowell, p.150; emphasis in original.

³¹⁸ Elizabeth Shultz, ‘And the Children May Know Their Names’, *Callaloo*, 11 (1988), 371-77 (p.372).

³¹⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.32.

economic power that the white mistress rejects and this is neatly symbolised in Nehemiah's comeuppance in that it is Ruth's baby girl, Clara, who scatters his papers in the sheriff's office. The innocuous actions of this small girl-child seem to anchor the retrospective nature of the narrative in the late twentieth century, a time that openly challenges automatic assumptions about male power.

This challenge to assumptions regarding the authority of the male word is also seen in the confrontation with the white father-figure in *Dessa Rose*. Nehemiah says he wishes to record the 'facts' of the slave rebellion when he questions Dessa, but, according to Patton, 'clearly he has not come in search of facts, but for material to fit into his version of history.'³²⁰ This version of history is what the novel rejects, as elucidated by the state of his papers, which were supposed to provide a guide to avoiding slave rebellion; his papers have been rendered as nothing, indeed many of them are blank. His history is void, and in this Williams extends her challenge to William Styron, as she announces in the author's note that precedes *Dessa Rose*. Williams explains that the novel is in part an answer to a 'certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies [...] that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner.'³²¹ Shultz likens Nehemiah to 'the interviewer who first recorded Nat Turner's story following his rebellion' and 'William Styron [who] later distorted Afro-American experience linguistically.'³²² By confronting Nehemiah and showcasing his inadequacy, the joint power of Dessa and Ruth allows for history to be reclaimed by the women in this work that was originally a short story called 'Meditations on History.' Williams's original title clearly serves as a direct response to Styron's claim about his novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, implying that it is not so much an historical novel but a 'meditation on history.'³²³ Indeed

³²⁰ Patton, p.133. Morrison also considers the role of the white 'Schoolteacher' character who instructs his nephews in how to record the 'characteristics' of the slave Sethe. *Beloved*, p.193.

³²¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.5.

³²² Shultz, p.371. For more on Williams's challenge to Styron see Mitchell, *Freedom*, pp.68-9.

³²³ William Styron, 'Author's Note' (1967), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (London: Picador, 1988), p.ix.

Dessa Rose does offer meditations rather than a meditation because it offers a plurality of voices, and in this, too, the perspectives of the white mistress and the black female slave are also heard, rejecting the ultimate authority placed on the word of Nehemiah as putative patriarchal figure for slave and for mistress.

In *Property*, too, the voice of the white mistress is heard and her confrontation with male authority through a father-figure is engaged in the text. In this novel, the white mistress makes an uncomfortable point of identification, but her realisation about the history of her own father is equally painful. Manon has a direct experience of the suffering caused by slavery, almost to the degree that she is guilty of inflicting suffering on her slaves. *Property* faces up to the guilt of the white mistress by exposing her complicity in the slave system, but this is also filtered through the revelation of inherited guilt: Manon's father, Percy, is also apportioned blame in the novel. It becomes clear that Manon's father was not murdered, as his wife prefers to claim, but that he committed suicide because of his wretchedness. Manon reveals that her father had long maintained that the artist of the wedding portrait that sits in her mother's drawing room has 'romanticised' his image, yet it becomes clear that it is Manon who has romanticised her father's image.³²⁴ Her cherished memories of her father become tainted when Manon comes to realise that his obsession with the slaves, driven by his desire for absolute authority, has damaged his ability to forge loving familial ties with his wife and daughter. Here, slavery causes the white mistress to suffer, but because her first-person revelations expose Manon's solipsistic delusions, this does not offer her exculpation for her part in causing suffering.

Beyond this self-delusion on the part of Manon, the novel utilises the character of her father to destabilise the romanticised image of the benign slaveholder in general.³²⁵ Percy represents the paternalistic white master

³²⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.70.

³²⁵ For more on paternalism see 'Planters, Paternalism and White Society,' David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South from Slavery to Civil Rights* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.54-59.

who insists that slavery is beneficial to servants as well as masters. Manon reflects nostalgically on her father's self-styled progressive regime on the plantation of her childhood. She lovingly recalls the traditional New Year's party, as if this one pleasant night could make up for enslavement, and in this her naiveté is revealed starkly. Manon's estimation of her father is high but resembles received opinion: 'Father was strict and fair.' He disallowed share-cropping as it led to 'divided loyalties' and believed the 'farm is their provider and protector.'³²⁶ Percy's ideas undercut the specious idea of the benevolent slaveholder, as while there is not the horror and negligence of the Legree plantation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, neither is there any opportunity for the slaves on his plantation to act independently.³²⁷ Moreover, in accordance with her father's instructions, Manon is not allowed to play with the slave children and is raised in solitude, contributing to her isolation. This situation also points to the damage done to both Manon and her father by his determination to separate the races as well as to dominate everyone on the plantation in his desire for absolute power, elucidating that it is tyranny and not beneficence that is at the heart of slave-holding for Percy and those he represents.

Manon has been instructed to see her father's plantation as an ideal. He had wanted to be valued and appreciated by his slaves; for example, he insists on finding and then selling any runaway, believing any other approach lenient, because it suggests lack of gratitude on the part of the escapee. Yet this supposed benevolence is never applauded in the novel: instead *Property* reveals a vainglorious man, who nevertheless is destroyed by his own insecurities. What he sees as his supremacy can certainly be read as tyranny. He considers his leadership to be of paramount importance in all his dealings with 'his' slaves, but his regimen is less than perfect.³²⁸ A kind of lurid power characterises his desire to be worshipped by the slaves and this despotism both debases and deranges the slave master.

³²⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.23.

³²⁷ For a description of conditions on the Legree Plantation, see Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, pp.317-24.

³²⁸ Martin, *Property*, p.24.

Manon learns from her aunt that her parents' marriage has also been debased because of slavery. When she remarks that Aunt Leila's optimism reminds her more of her father than her mother, her aunt replies obliquely, 'Your mother had trials to bear, as have you.' Aunt Leila confides to Manon that her parents had had two or three happy years but after the death of her two baby brothers her father had, in her estimation, 'allowed his grief to affect his reason.' She relates that he became 'obsessed' with the management of Negroes on plantations, writing multiple treatises in the belief that his system would be 'heaven on earth.' His writings are viewed with suspicion by his wife and her family and are never endorsed. His redundant treatises and ignominious death make it clear that Percy is no different to other idealists, and his systems have failed too: even Aunt Leila can see this. Here, also, the novel exposes the paradox behind the myth of the benign plantation 'father.' Manon's aunt recounts that '[h]e seemed to think somehow he was going to make the Negroes believe he was God and his farm was Eden, and they'd all be happy and grateful.'³²⁹ Whilst this attitude does point towards Percy's delusions, it is also a comment on the fallacy that slavery could ever be an ideal, or even acceptable, for enslaved people and is another way in which *Property* forcefully confronts the essence of white guilt.

Manon is sadly disappointed by her father, also played out in the layering in the degree of sympathy and of blame that may be accorded to her. Her delusion is a symptom of the system. After her marriage, Manon thinks her father would come and rescue her from her 'humiliation' if he were still alive and asks 'Do the dead see us? Is father weeping for me in the graveyard?' She foolishly believes that 'father [...] was all that stood between [her] innocent happiness and chaos.' Her innocence here can only be characterised as naiveté; Manon sees her father as a heroic figure. She reluctantly remembers that two Negro boys informed her that her father shot himself and lit the fire in which he died himself, recalling to herself how initially she refused to believe it by murmuring the words, 'I never told

³²⁹ Martin, *Property*, pp.188-90.

anyone this lie the boys told me' to herself. She continues to idolise her father and when she finds his diary, whilst sorting through her dead mother's belongings, Manon exclaims 'what a treasure!'³³⁰ The irony of this overstatement is underscored by the fact that she does not want it to come into contact with Gaudet's letter, which arrived on the same day, 'so strong was [her] sense that one should not touch the other.' This irony discloses Manon's failure to see the similarities between the two men and their shared guilt, and her continued delusion mitigates any sympathy that we may otherwise feel for Manon at her ensuing disillusionment.³³¹

Any other sins of this particular father are occluded in the text. What is also missing is any mention of Manon in her father's diary: it is as if she is of less significance than his human property, too, illuminating the corrupting power of slavery, because neither his white nor his black family benefit from Percy's particular brand of paternalism. Manon is shocked by her aunt's revelation of her mother's 'trials', these being at least in part Percy's unwillingness to father another child and the resulting coldness that she had to endure. Manon is ultimately disenchanted by her father, finally realising the truth that he did not really love her or her mother. From her new perspective, slavery has sullied him, too. His wedding portrait no longer offers her 'comfort' and she concedes that it has indeed been romanticised. She realises the 'he was an impostor' and lays the portrait 'face-down on the table.'³³² This highly symbolic gesture marks a bitter realisation for Manon. She acknowledges that she has been let down by the men in her immediate family. Manon's loneliness and isolation are a direct result of her father's involvement in slavery, as is the disruption of normal family life, but this is also the legacy that Manon enshrines in her own 'family' when she denies love to both Gaudet and to Sarah in different ways but in direct response to what she sees as her own suffering. And so the suffering the white mistress endures is shown in *Property* to be inextricably linked to the suffering for which she is responsible.

³³⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.18; p.24; p.51; p.77.

³³¹ Martin, *Property*, p.79.

³³² Martin, *Property*, p.196; p.197.

The father-figure in retrospective plantation fiction acts as a representative of authority precisely in order to question the veracity of this power dynamic. Each of the novels I explore here includes a challenge to the authority of the male head of the household. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Henry's authority is challenged by virtue of his wife's superior social status and her high-handed manner; although in fiscal matters and ultimately in relation to the fate of the slaves Sapphira defers to her husband and bows to conventional notions of male power. In *Dessa Rose*, inherited guilt is also confronted through the character of Nehemiah. Ruth supplants his power by exposing his hypocrisy and fraudulence; that she does so whilst successfully pursuing a fraudulent scheme of her own adds a poignant irony to the novel's interrogation of the financial motives behind slavery and its clear condemnation of the myth of the white and black family as it was presented by supporters of antebellum slavery. Ruth rejects not only the patriarchal authority that Nehemiah represents; in presenting her formation of a new community with the slaves the novel also troubles notions of authority by positing a new type of black and white family, in which the inhabitants enjoy mutual benefits. *Property* too allows male authority to be supplanted in its consideration of inherited guilt. Manon faces the bitter realisation that her cherished admiration of her father is based on 'lies'.³³³ That lies are at the heart of the myth of the beneficent white and black family is underscored by her rejection of male authority in the novel.

Husbands: Sexuality and Complicity

The dynamic of power between men and women is also pivotal in the relationship of the white mistress with her husband. However, where the concept of ultimate male authority is challenged in relation to the father-figure as representative of patriarchal power in the novels, the intimacy of the white mistress's relationship with her husband calls for more subtle and tentative disruptions of power, and this is what I explore in this section. In

³³³ Martin, *Property*, p. 194.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Henry's assertion that his wife is the 'master' is made playfully, but the social order of the time does not permit Sapphira to have ultimate authority and his role as master is instead underwritten by society, as I have explained. Indeed, Henry enjoys a degree of independence and this is demonstrated in his ability and desire to absent himself from home and from Sapphira's side. Although the expectations of Southern hospitality dictate that Henry cannot dismiss Martin from their home, he is also free to absent himself from the young man's company. But it is in his relationship with his wife that Henry casts most light on the portrayal of the white mistress in this novel. Henry's love and respect for Sapphira contributes to a partial redemption of his wife's guilt regarding slavery, marking a subtle shift in the power dynamic because his good opinion has the power to redeem her name, at least to some degree.

In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth's husband Bertie is absent for the course of the action, but her growing awareness of his inadequacies contributes to the white mistress's emotional growth and her burgeoning awareness of her complicity in slavery. This, along with her relationship with the former slave Nathan, serves to disrupt the accepted power dynamic because Ruth questions the automatic right of her husband to authority and respect. The move away from admiring Bertie comes to characterise Ruth's move towards independence and insight and towards a more inclusive notion of family than she had previously entertained. In *Property*, however, insight and self-awareness are exactly what the white mistress lacks, suggesting the damage done to her own psyche. Yet in the portrayal of Manon's complex relationship with her husband Gaudet much is revealed about the delicate balance of power and complicity. All three novels consider marriage as a site wherein they might explore the nature of power and of culpability in relation to slavery.

Part of what addresses culpability in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and what appears to reclaim Sapphira from being characterised as outright demonic slave mistress, is the love and respect she earns from her husband. The first two words in the novel are 'Henry Colbert', and an understanding

of his thoughts and actions is crucial to comprehending his wife.³³⁴ Henry both respects his wife and feels affection towards her. He is delighted by Sapphira's sleight of hand when she pours rum into his tea and Sapphira equally takes it as a 'treat' when Henry makes a fuss about her suggestion that Bluebell would be a fair substitute for Nancy in taking care of the mill-house. Even here though there is a sting to their power-play, as Sapphira recognises that whilst talking about Bluebell they had both been thinking about Nancy, and this lack of full disclosure unsettles her.³³⁵ There is clearly a reserved affection between the white mistress and her husband in Cather's text, but the underlying power struggle means that their relationship is not smooth. Henry embraces evident affection and admiration for his wife and he accommodates her partly because he is placid by nature, but he is not wholly compliant; instead he is resourceful to the point of being independent in his quotidian affairs.

An aspect of Henry's self-contained nature that unsettles Sapphira is that his absences lead to her loneliness. One key example will serve to elucidate this. On the night of Old Jezebel's funeral Sapphira does not want to be 'alone', but Henry insists on returning to his sanctuary at the mill.³³⁶ This move allows Sapphira to dwell on her rancour, something that she will inevitably take out on Nancy. She wants to share the triumph of the funeral in terms of how it reflects her position as a generous and benevolent slave-mistress, but Henry seeks solitude. In return for the 'affectionate solicitude' with which Henry condoles Nancy, Sapphira responds with 'an expression of annoyance', her 'hard' and 'bitter' face illustrating her 'indignation' and subsequent 'anger.' Sapphira's self-satisfaction is clearly undercut by her own mixed feelings and suspicions about the nature of her husband's relationship with Nancy. This is textured by Cather as Sapphira is literally an invalid, but she begins to feel that Henry's affections for her may be invalidated because of a system which implicitly allows him access to his female slaves. His wife has no direct evidence that Henry would take

³³⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.3.

³³⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.52.

³³⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, p. 104.

advantage of Nancy, but she is aware of the girl's wholeness and hence attractiveness. His self-sufficiency and wish to set himself apart leave Sapphira isolated, alone and brooding over what she perceives as Henry's lapse and not being able to comprehend 'the meaning of that intimate conversation.'³³⁷ And yet her husband has his own inner dispute to contend with.

Henry spends the evening of the funeral contemplating his conflicted opinions about who is responsible for slavery. He uses language to distance himself from the fact of his own role as slave-owner. He describes the slaves as 'part of the Dodderidge property and the Dodderidge household', with the repetition of 'Dodderidge' clearly acting as a distancing mechanism. He also reminds himself that when he offered Samuel, his foreman at the mill, his freedom Samuel declined as he did not want to leave his 'home.'³³⁸ This ambivalence is echoed in the euphemism he uses for his wife's role as slave-mistress, which he calls 'management' and yet which he knows is nevertheless subservient to his official capacity as head of the household.³³⁹ Morrison describes Henry Colbert as 'a man of modest habits, ambition and imagination', and this may well be the case, but he is not without imagination when it comes to Nancy. Whilst his feelings for her are never fully articulated in the novel, that he has concerns about the stirrings of desire at all has a troubling effect when it comes to understanding the character of the white mistress.³⁴⁰ If Henry has some illicit sexual feelings towards Nancy then perhaps Sapphira has some justification for her fear and jealousy, albeit not for the extreme response she takes. Henry reflects on what he thinks of as the curse of the Colberts, implicitly understood to be a propensity for womanising. Reflecting on his nephew Martin has the effect of changing Henry's reaction to Nancy. He can no longer think of her as an 'influence' and he avoids her 'now that he must see her as a woman, enticing to men.'³⁴¹ Although he makes the symbolic act of cleansing himself

³³⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.103-4; p.105.

³³⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.108; p.109.

³³⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.63.

³⁴⁰ Morrison, *Playing*, p.19.

³⁴¹ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.192-3.

by washing in the stream, this does not rid the novel, or Sapphira, of fears about possible infidelity; neither does it resolve the conflicts about who is responsible for the iniquities inherent in slavery, the master or the mistress.

The different reactions of Henry and Sapphira to Martin complicate the responses that they each evoke as well as the degree of blame that they can each be assigned. Because of his awareness of his own incipient arousal, Henry tries not to think about his nephew Martin, 'indeed he put his nephew out of his mind as much as possible.' But Martin is described by Sapphira as a 'young blade', in a way that rather forgives his waywardness, in its combination of youth with its attendant folly and the affectionate pejorative 'blade', which is more suggestive of a scamp than a cad.³⁴² Martin's most striking feature is his blue tooth, a replacement for a tooth knocked out by the brothers of a girl he has taken advantage of, and that he wears almost as a badge of honour.³⁴³ And if Sapphira's encouragement of her nephew's licentiousness demonstrates Sapphira's reprehensible morality, then Henry's avoidance of facing up to Martin's designs on Nancy raises questions about his own virtue. He feels tainted by his inescapable familial association with Martin and what he represents: the Colbert lust. That Henry is able to reflect that 'he knew the family inheritance well enough' because 'he had his share of it', points to this acknowledgement of his weakness.³⁴⁴

The difference between Sapphira and Henry in their responses to Martin is that Sapphira plans and then encourages his advances and hence may be demonised for her premeditation, but Henry is troubled yet does not act decisively to prevent Martin's plans and is guilty of a sin of omission. This lack of action with regard to Martin is discussed by Mary R. Ryder, who sees him as a man suffering from a 'sense of displacement', caught

³⁴² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.189; p.199.

³⁴³ Cynthia Griffin Wolff identifies a sadism that erupts into Cather's texts, often presented as a masculine predatory force. She considers Martin, the men who fool Mandy Ringer's daughters and even Michael Blake as predatory in this novel. Wolff, 'Time and Memory in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: Sex, Abuse and Art', *Cather Studies Volume 3*, ed. by Susan J. Rosowski (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp.212-37 (pp.225-27).

³⁴⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.192.

somewhere between a 'gentleman' and a 'cavalier.'³⁴⁵ Whilst I agree with Ryder that Henry is 'neither morally inert nor static,' I suggest that it is his ambiguity which attenuates Sapphira's position: his absolute condemnation and banishment of Martin would have provided a definitive moral anchor, which the text denies. This interplay between wife's position and husband's position leaves the issue of Martin, and by extension their responsibility for Nancy's suffering, unresolved.

Ryder allows that Henry is restored to a position of honour because 'he is himself bound as an honourable husband who loves his wife in spite of their ideological differences,' but I contend that it is not so much that Henry is redeemed, but that, in fact, Henry's love of Sapphira acts to reclaim the white mistress in Cather's novel.³⁴⁶ Indeed Sapphira is arguably valorised in Henry's final analysis of his wife. Henry reflects on Sapphira's 'intrepid courage' in the face of her illness. Whilst he admits that he had 'never understood his wife very well', he declares that he 'had always been proud of her.' He attributes what he had previously thought of as her 'heartlessness' to 'strength', after his wife's death. Most tellingly, the text reveals that the miller 'held out stubbornly' that 'sometimes keeping people in their place is being good to them.'³⁴⁷ This perspective may even restore Sapphira to the place she aspired to, as a benevolent mistress, and it certainly highlights how the relationship of Sapphira with her husband complicates Cather's portrait and denies a complete demonisation of the white mistress character in this novel.

In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth too believes she is a beneficent mistress, yet it is not her husband who shores up this position but her realisation about the flaws of her marriage. This insight contributes to Ruth's acknowledgement of her own complicity in slavery, offering a partial redemption of the white mistress character in the novel. This reclamation of sorts is consistent with the period in which the text was produced, during which relations between

³⁴⁵ Mary R. Ryder, 'Henry Colbert: Gentleman Bound by the Code', in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections* ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp.130-37 (p.133).

³⁴⁶ Ryder, p.135.

³⁴⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.267-8.

white and black American women were undergoing a process of re-evaluation.

As I explored in the previous chapter, Williams insists on the counterpointing between slave and mistress at many intersections, and one of them is in their experience of marriage. Dessa's relationship with Kaine illuminates Ruth's marriage to Bertie at several points of interest. Dessa's relationship with Kaine is a love match, indeed 'love suffused her.'³⁴⁸ It is crucial to Dessa and to the novel that Kaine selects Dessa for his partner: this is no studding arrangement put in place by their master.³⁴⁹ He had wanted her for 'the marriage words.'³⁵⁰ Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu points out that 'the element of choice is an important component in self-determination' and this certainly applies to this slave union, despite its lack of legal status and the master's power to terminate it at will.³⁵¹ Yet Kaine's words to Dessa are tinged with irony when he says 'tell me all this goodness aint mine', because of course he cannot protect his claim to his wife.³⁵² But the novel presents the parallel case of Ruth's degree of choice in her marriage to Bertie Sutton and the power of ownership that the law confers upon him as a white husband.

The meeting of Ruth and Bertie is somewhat inauspicious because 'he had caught his foot on the hem of her gown' and 'she had narrowly missed spilling punch on him,' although 'they had both taken the mishap in good part.' Moreover, Ruth's ability to make a good character judgement is shown to be limited; she bases his quality on superficial chivalric values, claiming 'he was obviously someone; she could tell that by the way he dressed and his soft drawl.' Despite the worries of Ruth's father and uncle about Bertie's

³⁴⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.13.

³⁴⁹ In an interview Williams explains that she 'started out with this thing between Dessa and Kaine. It was really important to me to be able to imagine romantic love among slaves. I really wanted to say that slavery had not killed the passion and tenderness and gentleness in us'. See Cheryl Y. Greene, 'Conversation with Sherley Anne Williams', *Essence*, 17 (1986), p. 34.

³⁵⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.83.

³⁵¹ Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Black Woman Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.32.

³⁵² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.14. Also, for a detailed discussion of slave marriage see Gray White, pp.142-51.

financial security, her mother's indulgent arguments and Ruth's own 'tearful pleas' secure the match.³⁵³ In this, Ruth has more influence over her future than that allowed to Dessa and this conforms to Beaulieu's notion of 'self-determination.' Nevertheless, it turns out that Ruth's world is delimited by Bertie's own limitations.

And yet by facing up to the limitations imposed by her original family and becoming open to the prospect of a more comprehensive idea of family Ruth begins to transcend the limits imposed by the slavocracy at large. Ruth becomes distanced from her birth family because of the very definitions they are forced to apply to her husband. Initially she bitterly rejects what she refers to as 'malicious slanders' against Bertie, believing the accusations against him concerning amassing debt to be a 'stupid misunderstanding', but she finds she cannot forgive her mother for describing Bertie as a 'scoundrel, wastrel' and 'gambler.'³⁵⁴ In her wilful refusal to acknowledge the truth of her husband's gambling and excess Ruth echoes the solipsism identifiable in the characterisation of Sapphira and anticipates that which Manon perhaps most fully embodies throughout much of *Property*. But through her extension of her notion of family to contain some of the slaves on the Sutton Plantation, Ruth transcends these notions and faces the reality of her situation. Ruth's learning to see beyond her own prejudices and her tendency to filter everything through her own expectations is revealed instead when she begins to listen to the slaves and to learn from them. Ruth extends her community beyond the expected remit of a white mistress, her white husband and their children to assert her independence.

Ruth's independence from her husband is pivotal in relation to the degree of responsibility attributed to the white mistress in this novel. I am compelled by Shultz whose overarching argument about *Dessa Rose* is that in this novel 'knowledge precedes liberation.'³⁵⁵ Here, she avers that understanding both personal and communal history is crucial to any lasting sense of freedom. Whereas Shultz applies this knowledge to Dessa and the

³⁵³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.105-7.

³⁵⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.109.

³⁵⁵ Shultz, p.371.

other freed slaves, I believe it is most applicable to Ruth, the white mistress, and the self-awareness she obtains in the course of the narrative. In some ways, indeed, the women have both evoked a kind of liberation in that neither of them uses a patronymic. The lack of surname makes Dessa, as Mary Kemp Davis explains, ‘unnamed in a patriarchal sense’, but, I argue, it also signifies Ruth’s ultimate rejection of her role as wife, because she does not apply the Sutton name to herself and ultimately attains economic independence for herself and her children.³⁵⁶ In this shared quality Dessa and Ruth enact an independence that is to become both financial and sexual as the novel progresses, but is achieved through fully occupying their own names and integral selves. It is Ruth’s realisation that her husband is not worthy of her submission and devotion that gives her the impetus to discard her former role of plantation mistress and to adopt a kind of mastery and responsibility over her own actions.

To enable the white mistress to embody a fuller sense of personal integrity, *Dessa Rose* allows Ruth to confront the terms of her own marriage and, in part, her role as a mistress of slaves. At one point, for instance, Ruth acknowledges her position of privilege, admitting that ‘she knew Bertie had bought her leisure at some cost and she would not criticise him’, but this is tempered by her insistence that his frequent gambling expeditions are in fact ‘business’ trips and that her husband is a good manager: Ruth is not ready immediately to recognise her own complicity in the slave system. She congratulates herself on her compassion because she had ‘coaxed and pleaded with Bertie’ to desist in his physical chastisement of the slaves, and she recalls that, in fact, ‘the screams had stopped.’ Nevertheless, Ruth is later able to reflect that the punishments may not have stopped and that Bertie may have ‘merely moved them’ out of her earshot.³⁵⁷

These adjustments in her thinking and others are facilitated by Ruth’s active listening to the slaves, in direct contrast to her former ability to ignore

³⁵⁶ Mary Kemp Davis, ‘Everybody Knows her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*’, *Callaloo*, 40 (1989), 544-558 (p.544). Elizabeth Shultz also remarks on Dessa and Ruth, ‘neither of whose names is associated with the surname of a man’. Shultz, p.372.

³⁵⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.109; p.138.

that which she could not immediately hear. When Nathan makes her confront some of the worst aspects of slavery by explaining to her 'you see so many people beat up by slavery Miss'ess [...] turned into snakes and animals, poor excuses even for they own selfs', she is able to concede that her husband 'drove [the slaves] hard and stinted on their food and clothing.' More than this, however, because Nathan has forced Ruth to consider others as individuals, she is able to recognise the failings in her own responses and confess her former inability to listen. Ruth admits not only her husband's culpability but her own when she acknowledges that 'they did look wretched [...] but then slavery was a wretched lot. And she had accepted this as long as she didn't hear the screams.'³⁵⁸ This supplies evidence of her ability to face up to the inconsistencies in her former view of her marriage and of herself.

Arguably, what most challenges Ruth's sense of herself as wife and mistress is her highly unconventional affair with the former slave Nathan. If Ruth's initial lack of discernment is evident in her lack of attentiveness, and her attraction for Bertie is based on the 'soft drawl' of his voice, then the appeal of Nathan is much more material: if he is smooth in Ruth's perspective he is also solid. Nathan's skin 'seemed like jet to her.'³⁵⁹ Yet, it is also the other defining characteristic of jet, its blackness, which is what makes Nathan so remarkable a lover for Ruth.³⁶⁰ In many ways Nathan provides a foil for Bertie: he is consistent and reliable and becomes a provider for the people on the Sutton Plantation, catching fish and hunting for meat. Ruth is 'touched' and gratified' by Nathan's solicitous, gentlemanly treatment of her and his affectionate use of a diminutive of her name, 'Mistress 'Fel.' She develops a close 'companionship' with Nathan. Here the novel has the temerity to wonder what might have happened if a white woman were to consider romantic allegiance with a black inhabitant of her home. Moreover, by opening her consciousness to allow the black people to join her family community, Ruth is able to see the wider implications of the

³⁵⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.149; p.150.

³⁵⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.131.

³⁶⁰ J California Cooper's *Family* (1991) also depicts a sexual relationship between a white Southern wife, Loretta, and a black former slave, Sephus.

patriarchal order of which she is a part. She is able to acknowledge that in some respects women and slaves share the status of property: 'Rufel flushed. She would have no more rights than they when Bertie came back.'³⁶¹ It is this realisation that is a powerful prompt in her further actions. Crucially, it persuades Ruth to accord status to Nathan; he not only becomes her lover but her protector, signalled most clearly when he acquires a pistol for her safety. Yet Ruth is not dominated by Nathan. In her rejection of the socially sanctioned patriarchal family order and her openness to being part of a new kind of community, Ruth's relationship with Nathan gestures towards an equality of sorts.

In embarking upon an affair with Nathan, Ruth asserts her independence. She may not have taken part in a violent insurrection as Dessa, Nathan and Harker have, but Ruth does rebel against society's expectations. Mitchell considers the other escaped slaves to be Dessa's 'kindred spirits' because of their shared experience as rebels, but I would also argue that Ruth becomes like kin to her despite Dessa's initial repugnance over the white woman's relationship with Nathan.³⁶² Nevertheless, Dessa recognises the danger posed by Ruth embracing freedom of choice, when she points out that 'a slave loving with the mistress, the master's wife, might be enough to give a white man the stroke' but that 'if Master lived, the slave was dead'; and Dessa has experience of a master's arbitrary power over life and death. Dessa is angry about the men thinking Nathan's 'rutting' with her was a 'fine turnaround,' with her use of the vulgarism highlighting her contempt. And yet Ruth's affair with Nathan is exactly the prompt that allows her to admit that Bertie and what he represents is 'dead' and that what is preferable is a family of her own making.³⁶³ Her relationship with Nathan also marks Ruth's journey of self-discovery from solipsism to at least partial self-awareness and understanding of her own complicity in slavery.

³⁶¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.145; p.146; p.150.

³⁶² Mitchell, p.82.

³⁶³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.168; p.177; p.154.

But if Ruth comes to be characterised by budding self-awareness, her later counterpart Manon is quite the opposite. As previously explored, many of Manon's revelations are more properly instances of self-revealing irony. This is certainly the case in relation to her husband. In the first instance, Manon blames her husband's relations with Sarah for what she thinks of as her 'sham of a marriage.' For example, after the birth of Walter, the child borne by Sarah and fathered by Gaudet, she admits to being 'nearly blind with resentment,' and here the novel exposes the pain that must have been endured by many white mistresses. However, her words are also tinged with irony because Manon is not aware of the full extent of her blindness and lack of insight. Manon confuses her responses to marital sexuality with this very resentment, and her desire becomes directed towards debasing her husband, in revenge for her own sense of debasement. Whilst, for instance, she admits her 'repugnance', 'revulsion' and 'resistance' towards her husband's sexual advances, there is ambivalence in *Property*'s portrayal of the betrayed plantation wife.³⁶⁴ Manon admits that she was not always repelled by her husband; although she found the experience of sex frightening, recalling 'the fury' of her husband's 'nightly assaults', she admits that after a while she began to 'anticipate his pleasure' and that she 'entered the fray.' Yet any pleasure Manon may have experienced is subsumed under her real goal: that of gaining power. Not only does the martial idiom signal Manon's perspective, but she admits that she recognises his 'abandonment' as evidence of her own 'power' over Gaudet. Nevertheless, this is not straightforward either as Manon also confesses that this was only a temporary 'delusion' on her part and later memory of her encouragements 'became a source of deep humiliation.'³⁶⁵ Her use of the word 'delusion' is ironic also, because she uses it not so much to accept her responsibility but to shift the blame back to her husband.

Indeed, Manon's focalisation tends to demonise Gaudet, yet *Property* does not present an oversimplified picture of his character. Gaudet is seen purely through the perspective of his bitter and disappointed wife and his

³⁶⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.32; p.60; p.61.

³⁶⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.165.

portrayal is consequently compromised by this limited point of view. However, the novel reveals instances of more than a one-dimensional despot. Although Manon judges him harshly, describing his warm greeting of Joel Borden as exemplifying ‘fake geniality’, for example, she also exhibits unacknowledged sympathy for him when she describes how he seeks his wife and his friend’s approval, looking at them ‘hopefully.’ She thinks of him as ‘dull’, someone who empties scenes of their colour and even uses the word ‘tyrant’ to describe her husband.³⁶⁶ There is a sense, however, that despite his tyrannical behaviour towards the slaves on the plantation, Gaudet himself is trapped within a system. This entrapment is represented in the novel in two key ways. Firstly, his first name is never revealed, preventing a sense of intimate knowledge of the character. He remains as Manon sees him, representative of a class of plantation owners, men who confer their propriety by way of their surname on the people and place that is their home. This denial of a name, and its associated lack of intimacy, serves to impose a kind of silence on Gaudet’s own perspective. This may be owing to the influence of the Brontës, which the author freely admits: in an interview with Alden Mudge, Martin cites the profound interest she has in *Wuthering Heights* and the figure of the interloper in a family.³⁶⁷ Like Heathcliff, Gaudet has only one name, placing him as an outsider in society, bereft of heritage and silenced by the monologue that forms the narrative. But Gaudet’s lack of given name is also a deliberate strategy, allowing *Property* to consider a different voice to that often recorded in the history of slavery by allowing the white mistress to speak for herself, offering her feminine perspective on the character of the master.

The second factor that places Gaudet, despite his own abusive behaviour, as a victim of sorts is what *Property* reveals about his own personal trials within his marriage and in running his plantation. The impression that Manon gives of her husband suggests his inability to understand the cause of her grievances and indeed his lack of empathy. His

³⁶⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.29; p.169.

³⁶⁷ Alden Mudge, ‘Book Page Interview for September 2007: Valerie Martin’, http://www.bookpage.com/0709bp/valerie_martin.html [accessed 24/01/2008].

petty tyranny is certainly signalled in the opening section of the novel, where he abuses the young slave boys for his own pleasure, and it is also seen in his treatment of Manon. Yet, again, this is never oversimplified. When Manon receives a letter from her husband expressing his sympathy at her mother's death and his concern for her own welfare, she imputes the 'loving affection' he declares for her to 'fake sympathy' and judges the letter as a 'perfect miniature of the monument of falsity he has made of [her] life.'³⁶⁸ Yet, in admitting that she found his signature 'completely illegible' Manon inadvertently confesses her lack of insight into her husband's character, in the novel's characteristic use of metonymy as self-revealing irony.

There is further evidence of the white mistress's own lack of discernment regarding her husband: according to Manon, he believes that her tears at bedtime are because of her failure to conceive a child and apparently fails to detect the real reason for her opium induced stupors. On one occasion he is so frustrated by her near inert body that he slaps Manon and tells her 'you are unbalanced.' Yet it is difficult to apportion all of the blame on Gaudet. Manon's opium addiction and her wish to remain childless, considered unnatural by her society, are not the only areas where she may be considered unbalanced. She holds the exaggerated belief that it is she who is incarcerated by slavery. This is seen, for example, when she resents having to speak to her husband when she returns from her mother's funeral: feeling jealous of the slaves, she declares that it is 'the slaves' blessing', to be 'forever exempt from the duty of greeting.' Again, the reliability of Manon's narration is called into question when it reveals that she fails to comprehend her husband's emotions. She is certainly blinded towards his motivations and feelings. This is highlighted when Gaudet tries to understand his wife but is unable to; when she accuses him of killing her. Looking at her husband, she admits that to her 'surprise' there were 'tears standing in his eyes.'³⁶⁹ These tears seem to offer some mitigation for Gaudet as they reveal genuine emotion, yet any exculpation he actually

³⁶⁸ Martin, *Property*, p.79.

³⁶⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.61; p.106; p.62.

reaps is arguably found only through his violent death at the hands of the slave insurrectionists and is certainly not ceded by his wife.

On the night of the rebellion Gaudet fulfils the expectations that would have been placed on a husband and master. He seeks to protect both family and property, through force. Even here Manon, a little drunk from wine, fails to comprehend her husband's motives and at the thought that he might save her she admits that 'a great perplexity came upon me.' His attempt to take control of the situation does not succeed; ultimately he is undone by Walter, who hurls himself at his father's legs, allowing the rebel captain to take 'advantage' of the imbalance this causes.³⁷⁰ The imbalance is, of course, also in the balance of power, which has shifted momentarily to the insurrectionists as they kill the plantation master and injure his wife.

The picture offered of the slave master in *Property* is not presented in all its complexity because it relies on Manon's limited perspective. To the last Gaudet appears to retain his attitude of 'resolute puzzlement', and this allows the novel to comment on the simultaneous lack of wisdom of the slave holder and his commitment to that position.³⁷¹ That Gaudet fulfils his expected role as slave master of course offers no exculpation of his role in slavery, indeed it underlines his guilt. However, Manon's jaundiced perspective of her marriage and her husband serve also to underscore her complicity in the suffering caused by slavery. Whilst she is able to recognise that slavery causes her to suffer, the irony of Manon's revelations evinces much more about her culpability in causing suffering.

In their evaluation of guilt, then, all three novels I explore utilise marriage to interrogate the degree of guilt experienced by the white mistress. The novels move along a historical trajectory whereby more guilt is recognised over time. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* the mistress shares guilt with her husband and may even be excused because of his admiration and respect. Apportioning blame is further complicated by the different attitudes of Sapphira and of Henry towards their nephew Martin and his

³⁷⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.121; p.122.

³⁷¹ Martin, *Property*, p.111.

role in causing the slave Nancy to suffer, and by the way in which Henry's own sense of honour is questioned in the novel. *Dessa Rose*, by contrast, does not attempt to exonerate the white mistress but it does offer her partial reclamation in the fact that Ruth faces up to her responsibility for the suffering caused by slavery. In her candid appraisal of her marriage and its failings and her choice of Nathan as a lover, Ruth confronts her own guilt and considers the possibility of a symbiotic family, in which both the white and black members can flourish. In *Property* the guilt of the white mistress is most readily apparent, but this is achieved through indirect means because the narrative is characterised by Manon's self-revealing irony. In her desire to blame her husband, she inadvertently, though undeniably, exposes her own culpability in slavery. What the novels also achieve in considering the wife's guilt as compared to the husband's guilt is to trouble notions of an accepted power dynamic between the white mistress and her husband, allowing a re-appraisal of the impact of slavery on the family in the context of the antebellum plantation. Where this impact is further explored is in relation to children, whether white, black or of mixed racial heritage.

Children: Complicated Posterity

Motherhood has become a central theme in much retrospective fiction about slavery; the experience of the slave mother is a particular concern in neo-slave narratives written by African-American women, as evinced in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991) and Lorene Carey's *The Price of a Child* (1995). But the role of the white mistress as mother, both to her own white children and to the slave children on the plantation is also richly complex. The retrospective fiction that I consider explores the white mistress's troubled relationship with her slave 'daughter' and her abolitionist daughter in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. *Dessa Rose* explores the white mistress's extension of care to a black baby and *Property* looks at its consequences and

the inextricable ties between a white mistress and her husband's bastard child, a symbol of the guilt of motherhood imposed by miscegenation.

It is not only in her betrayal of her 'surrogate daughter' Nancy that Sapphira's familial relationships are troubled: if the balance of power in Sapphira's relationship with her husband is at issue, her relationship with her youngest daughter Rachel is even more strained.³⁷² Yet in the portrait of abolitionist Rachel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* arguably provides a female role model. In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth models the possibility of sharing motherhood across the races in all its complications, including her own mixed reactions to the role of surrogate mother. In *Property* the child Walter becomes a nexus of guilt and abhorrence, allowing a potent exploration of the role of white mistress as reluctant mother in retrospective plantation fiction, through Manon's articulation of her relationship with this child.

Sapphira's relationship with her youngest child is fraught. Rachel is an abolitionist in thought and deed and places herself in opposition to her mother's role as slave mistress. On the issue of slavery both Henry and Rachel oppose Sapphira so that although it is Sapphira's slaves who feel the force of her will at times, it is her blood family who fuel it. Furthermore, the moral ambiguity associated with Sapphira is evident in the picture of a slave mistress who is jealous and conniving but also cared for loyally by her slaves, loved by her husband and respected, at least, by her daughter. In this relationship with her daughter the novel also offers a complicated portrait of a white mistress who is at once demonic and never fully demonised. If Henry Colbert's final reflections on Sapphira serve to dignify her position as white mistress, then her daughter's reaction to Sapphira as slave-holder is not quite as straightforward. Rachel's attitudes towards her mother are determined as opposites. She feels guilty when she speaks harshly to Sapphira, but is upset with her mother's harshness when she overhears her beating Nancy with a hairbrush. Sapphira is well-off and her generosity is carried out in public; Rachel is poor but helps others in an

³⁷² Hoover, p.241.

unassuming manner. Rachel is associated with warmth, taking pleasure in a 'spring day' and drawn towards 'expansive, warm-hearted people.' She is reserved towards her mother and the text makes it clear that it is Rachel's escape from the thinking of Back Creek that allows her a more impartial judgement on her mother's behaviour. The narration draws several rhetorical comparisons between the two women, for example relating that, having lived in Washington for a period, Rachel 'had known a wider experience of the world than her more worldly mother,' and all in all she is presented as a foil for Sapphira.³⁷³

Her opposition to slavery is central in Rachel's presentation as opposite of Sapphira. It is within the Back Creek community as well as her own conscience that Rachel discovers her abolitionist tendencies.³⁷⁴ Mrs Bywaters becomes a great friend and confidante of Rachel and her abolitionist credentials are established early in the text. As a young girl Rachel overhears a discussion between Mrs Bywaters and her father in which she refuses the gift of a slave girl. From this Rachel instinctively works out that 'it was the owning that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant.'³⁷⁵ This revelation posits a central truth of the novel and serves to confirm Rachel's place as a redemptive white woman. She and Mrs Bywaters remain friends because they share these 'deep convictions' and Rachel acts upon her convictions throughout the novel, aware that her actions will precipitate change, rather than acting on a sense of keeping things as they have always been, which is what characterises her mother. Indeed, the presentation of an idealised portrait of a genuinely benevolent white woman seems to ameliorate the portrayal of white womanhood in this text. Rachel's heroic response to Nancy's difficulties mitigates her mother's cruelty. Sapphira

³⁷³ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.115; p.120; p.131.

³⁷⁴ Rachel's abolitionism is not channelled into formal, political action. Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995) draws upon the story of Jane Johnson, which is recorded in William Still's *The Underground Railroad* (1872), to explore the abolitionist movement in action. Her main character, Ginnie, is a slave who escapes with the help of Still, but who must leave her third child in Virginia to do so. Ginnie, who changes her name to Mercer, becomes a speaker for the abolitionist cause. Cary, *The Price of a Child* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

³⁷⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.137.

thinks of her daughter as ‘rebellious towards the fixed ways which satisfied other folks’ and this assessment reflects her position in the text; Cather, writing backwards in the novel, allows Rachel to look forwards to a more enlightened period because Rachel’s forgiveness of Sapphira restores a kind of harmony between them.³⁷⁶

Because she is a woman, Rachel has limited power to change matters, but she is stalwart in her efforts to effect change in as much as she is able. She deplores her mother’s ‘ugly’ act in relation to Nancy and Martin but she can only be an ally to Nancy as she is unable to confront male transgressions. This is clear when Rachel admits to her, ‘I can’t run Mart Colbert out of the neighbourhood, but I think I can get you away.’³⁷⁷ Rachel is a pragmatist like her father in many ways; she recognises that she is ‘incapable of understanding her mother’ and she does not seek to, but she also acknowledges her ‘duty’ to her parents and sees the ‘risk’ that it will be to help Nancy to escape.³⁷⁸ Nevertheless, it is Rachel who organises the financial and practical details of Nancy’s escape to Canada. And it is not only Nancy for whom Rachel cares; she is also sorry for the impact her deception will have on her mother’s ‘pride.’ In this generosity of spirit as well as in her courage and resilience, Rachel offers a model for white women, which shifts the focus from solely demonising the white mistress. Rachel says, ‘Maybe I ought to have thought about how much she suffers.’³⁷⁹ But Rachel also suffers: she suffers the loss of her husband Michael and is left penniless as a result. She also suffers the death of one of her daughters in the course of the narrative. In her quiet resolution Rachel also provides a model that extends beyond Sapphira’s stoic endurance of her illness because Rachel is self-sufficient: she does not rely on the constant, enforced labour of others in order to bear her troubles. In these qualities she also models a more enlightened form of resolve.

³⁷⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.145; p.15

³⁷⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.169; p.218.

³⁷⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.219; p.225.

³⁷⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.245; p.246.

Rachel's choice to defy her mother and deny her rights to her human property marks out her occupation of a new centre of power. She overturns Sapphira's authority by providing Nancy with the means to make a life for herself in Canada.³⁸⁰ However, critics have responded less than favourably to Rachel's acquisition of power in the novel. Romines finds it troubling that in some ways Rachel's actions in favour of Nancy place her in the position of slave mistress: that by 'rescuing Nancy, Rachel arguably re-enslaves her.'³⁸¹ And Gwin has presented Rachel as 'the quintessential white mistress, who, though she did not own Nancy, treated her as a kind mistress would—with human dignity.'³⁸² But I argue that the point behind Rachel's presentation in the novel is precisely that she is not a slave owner: she rejects slavery in order to treat others with equal integrity as herself and in this Rachel represents an improvement on Sapphira in terms of moral character. Morrison does not devote much discussion to Rachel; she is more disturbed by Till's lasting devotion to her mistress because 'the elevating benevolence of the institution [of slavery] is invoked' by her loyalty. However, I argue that the loyalty of Sapphira's daughter to Till's daughter arguably enacts a reversal that does just the opposite, refusing to see slavery as a benevolent institution and rejecting it outright.³⁸³

The novel's portrayal of Sapphira's daughter allows Sapphira to be seen as a product of the past, of some mythical time when slavery was seen as universally benevolent, and it is only when Sapphira concedes to forgive Rachel that the character of the white mistress is partially reclaimed, because Rachel represents a more enlightened view that ownership of other people is wrong. Rachel receives a formal note of dismissal from her mother. It is only when fate intervenes and deprives Rachel of a daughter, through Betty's death from diphtheria, evening the scores, as it were, that Sapphira feels able to forgive her. Rachel returns to her childhood home with her remaining child and although 'there was always a certain formality between

³⁸⁰ Hoover argues that daughters in the text subsume the power of their mothers with a particular focus on the structure of the narrative. Hoover, pp.245-6.

³⁸¹ Romines, 'Willa Cather and "the Old Story"', p.210.

³⁸² Gwin, p.134.

³⁸³ Morrison, *Playing*, p.28.

Mrs Colbert and her daughter—a reserve on both sides’, the novel does record a ‘reconciliation’ between Rachel Blake and Sapphira.³⁸⁴ Arguably, this reconciliation is supposed to announce another reconciliation, that between Cather’s readers and the white mistress. This trajectory is also evident in the framing of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in which Cather not only returns to a story of the past but places her past self within the narrative. The child Willa is present at the reunion of Till and Nancy, a reconciliation which admittedly chagrins Morrison because it is ‘rendered in a postscript’, yet which remains at the moral heart of the text.³⁸⁵ This is because Cather has chosen to insert herself into the story of Nancy’s reunion not only with Till, but with Rachel, thus endorsing the era of freedom that can come only after the death of Sapphira and the end of slavery as an institution. Thus, Rachel is Cather’s representative in the story of this, her last novel.

Looking forward to future generations is also crucial within *Dessa Rose*; as noted, it is baby Clara who scatters Nehemiah’s papers, symbolically disrupting male authority and rejecting slavery, and it is as if in this action an imperative to the next generation is issued, insomuch as a white girl child has had a hand in undermining established notions of power. This imperative is also, of course, extended by Dessa to her children in the words of her epilogue to the narrative for whom it is written. She declares her hope that they will never again have to pay so dearly to ‘own’ themselves and the will to freedom is issued for both new generations: white as well as black.

However, it is primarily in Ruth’s attitude to the next generation that these revised notions of human values are enacted in the novel.³⁸⁶ The revisions are brought into sharp focus in Ruth’s complicated responses to Dessa’s baby, Desmond. When the baby is born, Ruth responds instinctively towards him; she feeds and cleans him with ‘a single-minded intensity.’³⁸⁷ It

³⁸⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.292.

³⁸⁵ Morrison, *Playing*, p.20.

³⁸⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.236.

³⁸⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.110.

is worth acknowledging this supposedly natural response, without making the mistake of essentialising Ruth as necessarily maternal by virtue of being female. Adam McKibble, for example, points out the danger of seeing Ruth, or indeed women on the whole, reduced to 'biological functions.'³⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Shultz's idea that, through Ruth, Williams creates the first white 'mammy' is attractive because of her claim that it 'implies that "mammying," a woman's suckling a child not biologically her own, may have nothing to do with race and everything to do with nurturing.'³⁸⁹ Whilst it was not common for white women to nurse black infants, neither was it unheard of.³⁹⁰ Significantly, the baby is nurtured owing to Ruth's actions and because of this his claim on the future is secured.³⁹¹

Ruth's motives are complex. She responds as a mother to a needy infant, but there is a sense also of her desire to be needed. Just before she encounters the newborn, Ruth reflects on her brief season as a belle, remembering that 'this was how she remembered her courtship, a lighted room, heat, noise, herself and Bertie strolling somewhere in the throng.'³⁹² Her memories are vague, but they are marked by the pleasure of being among others, of being part of some sort of community, and this feeling of inclusion is what asserts itself for Ruth when she sees Dessa's child.³⁹³ On the contrary, the first view Dessa has of her son is marked by her repulsion at his inclusion in the community of Ruth's making when she sees her baby being nursed by Ruth. The interchange that follows this revelation is

³⁸⁸ Adam McKibble, "These are the Facts of the Darky's History": Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts', *African American Review*, 28 (1994), 223-35 (p.227).

³⁸⁹ Shultz, p.373.

³⁹⁰ See Sally G. McMillen, 'Mothers' Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterns among Middle and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, 3 (1985), 333-56 (pp.351-54).

³⁹¹ Alice Randall includes a scene in which the mulatto girl Cynara is suckled by Ellen O'Hara as revenge for her daughter's affection for the mammy who suckled her and who is also Cynara's birth mother. This scene is primarily concerned with a power-play between the women and is less about nurture than Ruth's response to Dessa's baby. Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p.16.

³⁹² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.108.

³⁹³ J. California Cooper includes an example of how a white and a black woman bond because of motherhood. Sue and Always have their babies on the same day and this leads to a friendship of sorts between them. However, Sue does not know that her husband Doak is the father of both children. *Family*, pp.102-110.

charged with Dessa's pain, but also by Ruth's need to normalise her part in the proceedings:

"Where my child?" She didn't know she had spoken aloud until she heard the gasp,

"Right here."

And opened her eyes.

The white woman, the shoulder still bare, the curly black head and brown face of a new baby, nestled at her breast faced her now.

"See?"

"Naaaaawwww!" The scream rushed out of her as an explosion of breath.³⁹⁴

Dessa is horrified as this action goes against everything she has ever learnt about white women, but instantly Ruth tries to improve the situation. Her actions are conciliatory: she puts the child on his mother's breast, saying to her 'See? See? He knows his mama. See, he just want to eat,' and here her words are remarkable in their reasonableness, reflecting both her need to be part of a community and to extend the inclusiveness of that community.³⁹⁵

It appears that this white mistress cannot but perform what is perceived by her as the natural function of a mother because 'the baby was hungry and she fed him.'³⁹⁶ Furthermore, Beaulieu contends that 'Ruth responds to an infant, not to colour, foreshadowing her tremendous possibility for growth and acceptance.'³⁹⁷ And it is certainly the case that her acceptance of Desmond prefigures both her reluctant tolerance of Dessa and the others, and their eventual acceptance of her into their family. Yet Ruth is still a product of her environment and as such is not immune to the singularity of her situation. For instance, when she imagines how she would react were she to be observed nursing Desmond, 'a wave of embarrassment had swept over her and she looked around the parlour.' This reflection provokes a mixed reaction too though, as on one hand she 'felt some mortification at becoming wet nurse for a darky,' but on the other hand she is pleased to have 'confounded' the expectations of Ada and Harker when they discover her in this role. The portrait of Ruth is paradoxical and it is

³⁹⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.88.

³⁹⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.89.

³⁹⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.95.

³⁹⁷ Beaulieu, p.37.

her willingness to surpass expectations and confound others that allows her to be open to new possibilities. She does express a kind of horror at the child, admitting 'his dark skin might as well be fur,' but this sentiment is actually assigned by Ruth to her 'neighbours', because this is how she imagines they would have seen her actions. Ruth responds more positively to the child and it is precisely in confounding her neighbours that Ruth transcends racial limitations and opens herself to the possibility of personal development.³⁹⁸

Indeed Ruth's reaction to Desmond is an integral part of her own enlightenment: she learns about herself through this unusual relationship. This is why I disagree with Patton, who argues that the suckling is all about the 'power differential' between the two women. She argues that Ruth does not just feel sympathy for the baby, and that this demonstrates the novel's intention of 'complicating notions of sentimentality.'³⁹⁹ Certainly Ruth exhibits mixed feelings but her openness to the experience trumps her reservations. She wants to assert her independence, to act as she chooses more than to assert any power over the debilitated Dessa. Rather, a strange kind of powerlessness overcomes Ruth; this is seen when she 'gives herself over to the sensual rhythm of his feeding.' The problem of this power dynamic is addressed in earnest by Williams. Ruth admits to herself that the nursing gives her a pleasing sense of 'some real power over the wench and Ada,' but the word 'power', used very deliberately here, is immediately undercut by Ruth's humble admission that 'she had used the baby's hunger to spite the wench and was shamed by the knowledge.' Ruth's self-knowledge certainly emerges through her reflections on her role as mother substitute to this child. The admission from Dessa that she ran away because she did not want her child to be 'slaved' provides an impetus for Ruth's actions.⁴⁰⁰ Yet she also becomes aware of her need for the slaves in the care of her own children. The slaves make a viable living on the plantation as well as contributing to the profit Ruth makes through their

³⁹⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.101; p.102; p.127; p.102.

³⁹⁹ Patton, p.138; p.136.

⁴⁰⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.128; p.130; p.139.

slave-selling scam. This mutual-dependence is what, in effect, allows independence for all of them. Baby Desmond is central here, too: he is what cements Ruth's sense of being part of this 'throng', this community.⁴⁰¹

Ruth feels she has staked a kind of claim on 'Button', as they refer to the infant, when she has some influence in his name. She suggests that 'the baby be named for all of them, or at least a name that represented them all, and, on impulse, offered "Desmond" as a pretty compromise.' Later, she takes a 'private pleasure' in the significance of this act.⁴⁰² The ultimate authority to name Desmond rests with his own mother, but Ruth's influence is part of their shared potency in the novel and contributes to what Mitchell describes as Ruth's ability to see herself as well as the former slaves as 'self-authored subjects.' Mitchell also suggests that it is 'perhaps, more powerful that Ruth is not drawn in heroic proportions', and this is certainly the case.⁴⁰³ Her actions throughout the novel would not have been possible were Ruth to have acted alone, but this is precisely the point: it is her adoption of the former slaves into a community, a family, which allows each of them to attain agency. Naming and sharing the duty of care for the children in *Dessa Rose*, then, signals the establishment of a more inclusive community and attenuates elements of guilt as they apply to the white mistress in this novel. This is not at all the case in *Property*, in which claiming the role of nurturer is the last thing desired by Manon.

Manon rejects the role of nurturer that was seen as inherently appropriate for women of her class at the time the novel is set. She even lacks patience with her own mother and does not acquit herself well as a sick-nurse. Rather, her mother's death from cholera becomes for Manon an occasion of solipsism: she reflects only on her own suffering and loss. However, most specifically she resents her mother's 'constant insinuations about [her] inability to conceive a child.' Manon also resists the role of nurturer in that she completely rejects the expectation that she will become a mother. This also suggests the novel's admission of the damage caused by

⁴⁰¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.108.

⁴⁰² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.148.

⁴⁰³ Mitchell, p.78; p.77.

slavery to both the slave-holders and the enslaved, because it is the fact of Gaudet's children with Sarah that leads Manon to take steps to prevent her having her own children with her husband. Her visit to Dr Sanchez is instructive. Manon agrees to see the doctor about her supposed infertility not because she desires assistance with conception, but because she explicitly wishes to prevent it. The scene of Manon's examination by the doctor is described in great detail. Manon notices two yellow canaries 'in a wrought-iron cage, hanging from a chain' and later she finds her eyes drawn to 'a plantain tree [...] with a big, bruised purple pod of unripe fruit hanging from it.'⁴⁰⁴ Not only are the colours yellow and purple part of the discourse of miscegenation because they are used to describe the skin of mulattos, but these symbols of imprisonment and the promise of fecundity seem to conflate. The conflation of symbols serves to represent the unenviable position of the white mistress here. Manon is simultaneously reminded that she too is trapped within the institution of marriage and reproached for her inability to enter into motherhood and the role of nurturer.

It is deeply ironic that motherhood of sorts is thrust upon Manon in the person of Walter, the illegitimate son of her husband and her slave, Sarah. For of course Walter is not her own child and is instead the property of the plantation, despite his parentage. In this Walter represents the monstrosity of miscegenation, born of a coerced relationship between Sarah and her nominal master and invading the home of Gaudet and his wife, yet he is no monster: Walter, it emerges is deaf.⁴⁰⁵ It is highly significant that Walter's deafness is constructed by Manon as a blight, with 'no hope that he will ever be normal.' His behaviour is affected by his inability to

⁴⁰⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.38; p.40.

⁴⁰⁵ In this *Property* echoes an earlier canonical, yet controversial, text about slavery, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Here, Jim's daughter 'Lizabeth is described by her father as 'plumb deaf and dumb,' as a result of a bout of yellow fever. Her deafness stands as testimony to Jim's humanity and compassion in the book as he regrets having smacked the child because she failed to carry out a spoken request. When he realises the reason for her defiance is because she cannot hear his command, Jim declares 'Oh Huck, I burst out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, "Oh, de po' little thing! De Lord Almighty forgive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to forgive hisself as long's he live!"' Elizabeth is a child born out of love, and in Twain's novel her deafness is presented as an affliction and a source of her parent's sympathy. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.142.

communicate; even his mother does not understand Walter's 'strange gibberish' and in this way he is effectively silenced in the text despite the volume of his whoops and keening, recorded throughout. He is also viewed as damaged property, although there is no illusion that he might otherwise have been sold for a price, despite his paternity. Sarah's other child with the former butler Bam has already been sold before the action of the novel and she cares for her daughter Nell, despite her red hair, evidence of her father's identity. That Walter still represents property is one of the challenges posed by the text; *Property* does not shy away from the implication of people sold as chattel. In this Manon's coarseness and complicity in the institution of slavery is exhibited, for example on one occasion when Walter is outside Manon asks if this is safe but makes her meaning clear to Delphine: 'It's not him I'm worried about. It's the property.'⁴⁰⁶ The emphasis on the defining word of the novel is not lost: Walter's status as property is accepted because he is a slave, and yet as a child the conviction is conveyed in the novel that he ought not to be considered property at all.

Walter's place in the narrative is further complicated after the skirmish with the band of escaped slaves. Sarah leaves Walter behind when she flees the plantation with her baby daughter and he is instrumental in Gaudet's death, flinging himself at his father and alerting the insurrectionists to his whereabouts. This may be viewed as a kind of poetic justice, but the novel refuses such simplistic resolutions. It is Walter whom Manon finds beside her when she awakens following the night of the rebellion, after hiding out in the swamp. Their commonality is established as both are injured and both have witnessed the murder of Gaudet, and both of them have been abandoned by Sarah. Manon's first sight is that of Walter, whom she finds curled up beside her, bruised and battered like herself.⁴⁰⁷ The pattern of guilt is shifted subtly as this child has aligned himself with Manon in what is a turning point in the increasing revelation of her culpability. Manon is certainly not pleased by his company, though she

⁴⁰⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.183; p.6; p.44.

⁴⁰⁷ Martin, *Property*, pp.114-128.

admits he might prove useful, but sympathy is drawn to the boy. He alone seems to mourn Gaudet: he tries to lift the head of his dead father, 'shrieking all the while,' in something akin to genuine affection. When Walter comes into the kitchen covered in Gaudet's blood and 'weeping' Manon has no choice but to admit it is because 'his father' is dead on the lawn, and this acts as a public declaration of her husband's guilt as well as confronting the child's proper place in her family. For what Manon is not so swift to admit is that Walter offers himself to her as an ally of sorts; instead of an ally, Manon, with her customary solipsism, understands Walter as her husband's 'revenge' on her.⁴⁰⁸

Correspondingly, it seems as if Manon perversely wants to massage her indignation and her relationship with the child is full of complications. She proceeds to admit that she retains Walter as he will be part of her revenge on Sarah, saying, 'If I have to live with Walter [...] so does she.' She uses him to spite Sarah's prospects of finding love and respectability on her own terms with the freed businessman Monsieur Roget, taking pleasure in alerting Roget to the existence of Walter. She sets up his discovery theatrically, revealing 'with what amusement [she] heard the gleeful bark with which Walter is wont to greet new faces!' and how she malevolently points out the boy's deafness. Manon tries not to touch Walter if she can help it. She points out to Roget that 'he will never be worth anything to anyone.'⁴⁰⁹ In doing so, Manon's complicity in reducing people to property is unequivocal in her response to her only remaining 'family.'

Yet, although Manon admits she will never get used to the sight of Walter and he is observed clinging to her, 'like a cat' seeking comfort and causing mischief, they seem to develop an odd companionship towards the end of the novel. After their ordeal, Manon admits to herself that the boy always wants to be with her: 'He was fascinated by me.' She also reveals that 'Walter turned the morning nap by the fire into a ritual.' Like an unwanted cat that has inveigled itself into a household, Walter's place is

⁴⁰⁸ Martin, *Property*, p.129; p.131; p.146.

⁴⁰⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.151; p.182; p.183.

secure. However, Manon will only acknowledge Walter in her terms as ‘my husband’s curse, as impossible to accustom myself to or rid myself of as my own crippled right arm.’ In this correlation Manon reveals that she sees Walter as a liability, akin to a disability, which she is forced to tolerate. Hence *Property* does not allow Manon’s new-found tolerance of the child to descend into sentimentality and the complicated dynamics between them persist.⁴¹⁰

Walter’s presence becomes for her inevitable, but also an unwelcome responsibility. The role that he fulfils as the return of a repressed past, something that ought to have remained hidden and yet is clearly visible, is equally secure. That Walter and Manon suggest shared victimhood in their share of physical disabilities is true, but I argue that their inextricable pairing at the end of the novel also points forward to shared responsibility in relation to acknowledging white guilt. I concur with Oates that ‘if the obscenity of slaveholding—the making of another into “property”—is dehumanizing, it’s no less dehumanizing to the slaveholder than to the slave’, because ‘Martin’s white characters, including Manon, are locked into stultifying roles of pseudo-privilege and deluded noblesse oblige even as their lives are unravelling.’⁴¹¹ Manon’s life does unravel, highlighted by the fact that she is left with only Walter for fellow-feeling: this change certainly compromises her position of privilege. Oates’s idea of slavery dehumanising the slave-holder is also asserted in Manon’s rejection of Walter’s humanity despite her reluctant acceptance of his ineluctable place within her household. This, and the way in which Walter clings to Manon with tenacity, provides a pointed symbol of the enduring legacy of slavery on the Southern family.

Unlike Sapphira, then, Manon is not redeemed by her family’s fond memories and unlike Ruth she is not permitted the opportunity to transgress those norms and build her own community. Instead, Manon is left to confront the guilt of the slave system every day in her damaged arm

⁴¹⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.199; p.200; p.167.

⁴¹¹ Oates, p.139.

and through the presence of a damaged child. Nor does *Property* provide an idealised Rachel Blake character who defies slavery. Instead, the defiant solipsism of Manon means that *Property* calls attention to the guilt of the white plantation mistress because of her self-denial. That Manon's moral short-sightedness is central to *Property*'s portrayal of the white mistress means that this novel arguably offers a reply to the challenges of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, because it does not obscure the question of guilt. Yet, because her own delusions remain intact neither does Manon provide a definitive portrait that closes down all questions pertaining to the ultimate guilt of the white mistress over the myth of the white and black family on the Southern plantation.

The Family as a Site of Suffering

The idea of the white and black family remains an ambiguous notion in retrospective plantation fiction, and the complicity of the white mistress in shoring up this myth, or otherwise, remains unclear: none of the white mistresses are fully rehabilitated by the perspective of hindsight and none are fully renounced. Guilt is complicated by the myriad dependencies and expectations of family life in the South precisely because slavery damages both the slaves and their owners. This factor is demonstrated throughout the treatment of the white mistress's relations with both the white and the black members of her putative family in the novels I explore. Furthermore, the power dynamic of the patriarchal system is mapped on to the familial relations of the peculiar institution, and this too is dealt with in retrospective plantation fiction.

The mistress's initial relationship with patriarchy is examined in her relationship with her father in the novels. Although *Sapphira*'s father is mostly absent from *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, his presence is occupied instead by her husband Henry, who adopts a dual function in the novel. The patriarchal position is undermined through the character of Nehemiah in *Dessa Rose*, whose authority is destroyed by Ruth. In the person of Percy,

Manon's father in *Property*, the fallacy of the beneficent slave master is refuted when her delusions about her childhood hero are exposed.

Male authority is further troubled in the exploration of the white mistress's relationship with her husband in each of the novels, with sexuality being a central textual concern in each case. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Henry's independence contributes to Sapphira's insecurity and feelings of barely expressed sexual inadequacy. In *Dessa Rose*, Bertie's abandonment of Ruth allows her to reconsider her feelings and to embark on a wholly independent sexual relationship with Nathan. And in *Property*, Manon's conflicted attitude to her own sexuality and that of her husband is an over-riding factor in her misery and her longing for revenge.

The mistress's relationship with the plantation children is also of major importance in relation to the key project of retrospective fiction, that of seeking to understand complicity in slavery. Although Sapphira considers herself to be a surrogate mother for her slave Nancy, she ultimately betrays her. Yet her birth daughter Rachel Blake somewhat redeems *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* by offering an abolitionist role model. Ruth and Dessa's shared nursing and care of the baby Desmond points to a possibility of a more genuine community in *Dessa Rose*, but Manon's fraught association with Sarah's child Walter means that *Property* exposes more of the difficulties and complexities than any optimistic reading of the white mistress's relationship with her black family.

The authority of the male head of the household is challenged directly in the novels but patriarchal authority and the role of the father figure is also confronted through the ability of retrospective plantation fiction to question who has the right, the authority, to tell the story of slavery. That Cather inserts herself as a child into the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* has bothered some critics. For example, McKenzie argues that 'in a sense, then, the slave daughter's story has been a conduit for the author to inscribe her own story.'⁴¹² But rather than seeing Nancy's story as usurped,

⁴¹² McKenzie, p.87.

I argue that it is more fruitful to consider *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a record of the female experience of slavery, albeit recorded in the voice of a high-handed third person.⁴¹³ *Dessa Rose*, conversely, opens up a specific space for the white mistress's story to be recorded in the section of the novel that is focalised through Ruth. This perspective means that Ruth's voice can be heard and it is in this authorial approach as well as Ruth's destruction of Nehemiah's attempt to 'record the facts of the darky's history,' and by extension the novel's status as a response to Styron's story of slavery in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that patriarchal power is disrupted.⁴¹⁴ *Property* extends this space further because here the novel sacrifices both the omniscient authorial perspective of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and the multivalent plurality of *Dessa Rose* to present the unrivalled point of view of the white mistress alone. Manon's first person perspective challenges male authority by revealing her disillusionment with her father, but it also allows an unmitigated portrayal of her own delusion. This means that *Property*, as well as the other retrospective plantation fiction, demands a consideration of female guilt by the very means of undermining male authority.

Male authority is even further interrogated by the complicated portrayal of marriage and sexuality in the novels. Sapphira's insecurity is concerned very much with her simultaneous role as slave mistress and wife. It is because she insists on Nancy retaining her place as a slave that Sapphira feels her own place as wife is threatened by the younger woman's attractiveness to her husband. Yet what Henry's insistence on the value of one's 'place' also achieves is a return to the sense of elegy identified in this novel.⁴¹⁵ This insistence, too, complicates the power dynamic because it

⁴¹³ Not all critics think that Nancy's story is given no authority. I agree with Romines when she proceeds to complicate the picture of Nancy as having an 'overwhelmed and obliterated character,' because she is keen to point out that there are still factors that remain unrevealed about Nancy, something 'unknowable and her own'. Moreover, she goes back over the 'borders' to Canada, escaping the boundaries of the country but also the book. In Romines's final estimation, 'Nancy is a model construction of the successfully negotiated return' (p.216). I agree, and would also claim that in this she transcends the limitations placed upon a slave girl by the very fact that she escapes from the tyranny of her mistress, albeit the case that she only navigates a return after the mistress is no longer a threat. Romines, 'Willa Cather and "the Old Story"', pp.208-18.

⁴¹⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.39.

⁴¹⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.268.

suggests an implicit admiration for the Southern slave society: Henry admires his wife's success as a slave-mistress, even whilst feeling uncomfortable with the existence of the institution of slavery. This complication troubles the effectiveness of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a retrospective narrative because ultimately neither husband nor wife fully rejects slavery. Indeed, this 1940 text clings to a nostalgic version of slavery that is wholly uprooted only much later when Civil Rights era politics demanded outright condemnation. That condemnation is interrogated by the relationship between the white mistress and the men in her life in *Dessa Rose*.

Mitchell wonders if *Dessa Rose* could have been written before the feminist movement of the 1970s when differing white and black feminist agendas emerged in the United States, and answers 'probably not.'⁴¹⁶ This is partly because Ruth does not only reject patriarchy by dismissing thoughts of Bertie; her character also breaks the sexual taboo that formed part of this feminist debate because she figures a white woman who embarks on a sexual affair with a black man. *Dessa Rose* opens a more complex account of the white mistress by actively exploring prejudices generated by the least discussed and most controversial relationship not only in the antebellum period but particularly during the Restoration and beyond.⁴¹⁷ Yet here, too, *Dessa Rose* considers a different angle: the reaction of the black women, who are uncomfortable, suspicious and fearful of this relationship. The actual affair is introduced without preamble: 'Rufel and Nathan made love for the first time later that week.'⁴¹⁸ Williams avoids the temptation to titillate or sensationalise.⁴¹⁹ Indeed their love-making is presented as a natural extension of their close friendship, but it does undermine the

⁴¹⁶ Mitchell points out that 'although the differences between white feminism and black feminism have always existed, it was during this time [the 1970s and 1980s] that the disparate agendas of those on both sides of the colour line became more prominent' (p.78).

⁴¹⁷ For a discussion of how the 'patriarchal imperative to protect white women from the rapacious advances of black men became the pretext for lynching across the southern states', for instance, see Brown and Webb, pp.110-113 (p.110).

⁴¹⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.155.

⁴¹⁹ The 1975 film *Mandingo*, for example, is described as a 'sexploitation plantation epic' in Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War and the Plantation Legend* (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1995), p.207.

friendship between Dessa and Nathan and threatens the embryonic solidarity between Dessa and Ruth. This means that although *Dessa Rose* offers the possibility of a symbiotic family between black and white individuals it is not wholly optimistic and difficulties are still acknowledged.

Property certainly foregrounds the difficulty of any mutually beneficial familial ties emerging from the institution of slavery. Manon's desire for revenge and her victimisation of Sarah mean that tyranny prevents this white mistress from properly surmounting the patriarchal restrictions on her life, and her renunciation of the role of plantation mistress offers her little more than partial independence. Manon's revelations also jeopardise truth in the novel because her first-person perspective limits the point of view to her own misguided perceptions: Gaudet's ideas are either misconceived or silenced. For example, on one occasion, when Gaudet sends Sarah and Manon to Manon's room as rumours of insurrection rage, because as he says they will be 'safer together,' Manon believes it is because of his desire to protect Sarah. The irony invoked here serves to illuminate the complexities of the white mistress's simultaneous victimhood and guilt in ways that transcend the earlier novels considered here. Manon describes her husband's place in relation to herself and Sarah with wry humour, as 'trapped between two furies.'⁴²⁰ Certainly this factor anticipates Gaudet's ultimate death, as the two women do hold his fate in their hands on the night of the insurrection, but it also draws attention to the master's role in this novel that places the emphasis of power on the women, and with it the responsibility this carries. An added implication of this silencing of the husband's perspective is that, whereas Henry exonerates Sapphira in part by admiring her despite her faults, Manon's insistence on shifting the blame to her husband serves rather to incriminate her, and her culpability in the suffering caused by slavery is more acutely revealed.

The ground covered by all of the retrospective plantation fiction reveals a shared conviction that slavery damages the owners as well as the owned. This moves the texts beyond the position occupied by some neo-

⁴²⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.10; p.41.

slave narratives because it moves the purpose beyond that of asserting the dignity and humanity of slaves in the face of adversity. This is demonstrated particularly in the novels' treatment of the next generation. The children in the novels naturally look towards the future and are thereby the means for considering the legacy of slavery.

Morrison admits that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* had been 'virtually jettisoned from the body of American literature by critical consensus' and it is easy to see why this has been the case.⁴²¹ The novel's elegiac stance about the slave South and its partial reclamation of the white mistress are perturbing. Yet the figure of Rachel Blake, as I argue, at least offers a positive image of white antebellum women that goes some way to answer the criticism levelled against the novel's portrayal of slavery in general and the white mistress in particular. *Dessa Rose* offers an optimistic, although never unrealistically sentimental vision of the future in the joint care that Dessa and Ruth provide for the black baby, Desmond, as well as the white children, Clara and Timmy, on the plantation. This suggests the possibility of overcoming some of the damage by at least considering a shared heritage. *Property* is much less optimistic in its portrayal of Manon's refusal to change and to face up to her responsibility, yet even so this novel looks to the future in her ultimate acceptance of Walter as her companion. This unlikely pairing at the end of the novel provides an unspoken yet ineluctable admission of the white mistress's complicity in the suffering caused by slavery, whilst simultaneously exposing her own suffering within the institution. Ultimately, it is fair to argue that this acknowledgement is the best that retrospective fiction can hope to achieve.

⁴²¹ Morrison, *Playing*, p.18.

Chapter Three

One need not be a chamber - to be Haunted -
One need not be a House -
The brain has corridors - surpassing
Material place –

-Emily Dickinson (Poem 670)

The White Mistress and her Home

Beyond the Big House

The Southern plantation has become an iconic site, figured as the archetypal home of masters, mistresses and slaves. The plantation is associated with opulence and indolence in relation to the white owners, associations juxtaposed with squalor and back-breaking labour in relation to the black, enslaved inhabitants. Although my discussion here refers to some homes that are not strictly plantations, these locations in which slavery pertains can still be understood and explored in relation to the plantation because they observe the codes under which slavery operates. I begin this chapter by describing the workings of the antebellum plantation, with an emphasis on the domestic aspects of plantation life. I also consider how the white mistress's home operates as a Gothic space: I argue that for the white mistress, living in close quarters with her slaves, in particular the female slaves who are my concern in this thesis, contributes to an uneasy habitation, which is often figured in Gothic terms. Indeed, I argue that the mistress's home in fiction about antebellum slavery is often characterised by the *unheimliche*, and I explore this feature of retrospective fiction specifically in this chapter. The prevailing *unheimliche* atmosphere is compounded by the stifling sense of claustrophobia that is endured both by slaves and by mistresses, and this is, in turn, exacerbated by an unsettling voyeurism that dominates their experience of the plantation home.

For the white mistress in history and in fiction the home environment was not necessarily the huge, white colonnaded mansion, set on acres of land and serviced by many slaves that is best characterised by the enduring grandeur of Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, despite the tenacity of this image in the cultural imaginary. By 1860, more than half of slave-owners in the fifteen slave states owned no more than five slaves, and three-quarters of Southern households owned no slaves at all, yet 'the stock image of the slave environment is the great plantation, with its scores or even hundreds

of slaves.⁴²² This image fosters a glorification and even glamorisation of the old South, and this is something which retrospective plantation fiction addresses. The glamour, however, is often undercut, specifically in retrospective plantation fiction, by the incorporation of Gothic motifs and concerns which I explore in this chapter. Nevertheless, the settings for fiction about antebellum slavery are as varied as the institution itself, ranging from ‘Sweet Home’ in *Beloved*, with fewer than ten slaves, and the Mill Farm in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which is not technically a plantation at all, to the substantial Gaudet Plantation in *Property*. Bruce Wexler notes the significance of the dominant image of the plantation:

Throughout their history, plantations had a significant impact on the political, cultural and economic life of the South. Over time, they had evolved into a distillation of both the best and worst aspects of Southern life. For a wealthy elite, plantations represented the epitome of gracious living, hospitality, style, beauty and good manners. But [...] the “moonlight and magnolia” lifestyle depended on the weary toil of generations of slaves. The plantations cast long, dark shadows over the lives of black Southerners.⁴²³

In many ways, the plantation has come to represent a microcosm of the South in fiction about slavery: the home itself comes to represent the fraught space allocated to the peculiar institution and those subject to it.

Plantations were economically powerful and associated with wealth and comfort. The architecture of the typical plantation was commodious. Houses were built in the Greek revival style, based on symmetrical columns and featuring open porches. They were not solely single buildings, although the customary image in the twentieth century tends to be of the big house like Tara, but business enterprises with outbuildings including cotton and grain stores, mills, smokehouses, barns, silos and chicken-coops, stables and blacksmiths and laundry houses. Crops were cotton, tobacco, sugar, rice and hemp, but many plantations also had gardens with border plants and vegetable gardens, producing much of the food consumed on the

⁴²² See Parish, *Slavery*, pp.1-16 (p.5).

⁴²³ Bruce Wexler, *The Authentic South of Gone with the Wind* (Philadelphia and London: Courage Books, 2007), p.14.

plantation. And, as Eugene Genovese notes, ‘in essential respects, the plantations and the small rural slaveholdings shared the same household features, which were distinguished by the role of production and reproduction.’⁴²⁴ The economic viability of the plantation was related directly to producing goods from crops, and growing produce to sustain the inhabitants. But because it depended on the labour of slaves, production was extended to the reproduction not only of livestock as in typical agricultural models, but of slaves as commodities. The economic success of this enterprise meant that those who benefited from the system lived in comparative luxury.

Plantations demonstrated clearly the disparity between the material conditions that applied to white and black inhabitants. Because slaves were themselves considered part of the culture of property and reproduction, the comfort and space available to the slave-owners was rarely extended to the slaves, who lived in mostly cramped slave quarters, which were separated from the big house. It is not only writers of retrospective fiction who exploit the language of the Gothic to describe the disparity between the grandeur of the big house and the squalor of the slave quarters. Parish, for example, draws on contemporary sources to describe the areas inhabited by the slaves as ‘rickety, unpainted, cramped slave quarters, with earth floors and windows without glass, swept by draughts in winter, stifling in the summer heat, choking with smoke, or swarming with insects.’⁴²⁵ This idiom echoes that of Charles Dickens, whose accounts are representative of contemporary commentators and visitors who did not recognise the paternal, beneficent system that Southern patriarchs believed was typical of the peculiar institution. Dickens visited a twelve-hundred acre plantation in Virginia in 1842 and records details of the slaves whom he designates ‘biped beasts of burden’ and their ‘crazy, wretched cabins’ that he viewed in stark contrast to the ‘pretty villas and cheerful houses’ of the white people in Richmond.⁴²⁶ He writes of ‘an air of ruin and decay abroad which is inseparable from the

⁴²⁴ Eugene Genovese, “Our Family, White and Black”, p.71.

⁴²⁵ Parish, p.39.

⁴²⁶ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Monarch, 1926), p.145.

system.’⁴²⁷ Dickens’s description reveals his moral outrage towards the existence of chattel slavery, although he admits to being charmed by the best plantation homes.

A description of just such a ‘cheerful’ house is offered in another contemporary account. In her diary, Chesnut offers a characteristic depiction of a Southern plantation in a description of her family’s main plantation home, Mulberry. She eulogises here in a scrap book composed before the American Civil War, but it is also where she and her husband lived afterwards:

But here is the house—a brick building, capacious and massive, a house that is a home for a large family, one of the homesteads of the olden times, where home comforts and blessings cluster, sacred alike for its joys and its sorrows. Birthdays, wedding-days, ‘Merry Christmases,’ departures for school and college, and home returnings have enriched this abode with the treasures of life.⁴²⁸

This description is focused idyllically on the benefits the plantation home offered its white residents. One of the particular benefits afforded the white occupants was the elaborate dining experienced in the big house. Elsewhere Chesnut records many examples of the feasts that also came to characterise Southern culture of the period.⁴²⁹

Indeed, an association formed between sophisticated dining etiquette and extensive meals with the planters’ image of themselves as an aristocratic elite. Mary Titus records how ‘the groaning table of Southern cuisine, heavily laden with baked, stewed, creamed and beaten burdens, attests in cookbook, memoir, and fiction to the hospitality of the Southern home.’⁴³⁰ But Titus also reflects that ‘in the separation of kitchen and house, as well as the attention paid to elaborate dining, one can read symbolic separations between those who prepare the food and those who eat

⁴²⁷ Dickens, p.144.

⁴²⁸ Chesnut, ‘Introduction’ to *Diary*, pp.xiii- xxii(p.xvii).

⁴²⁹ See Chesnut, *Diary*, pp.166-7; p.271.

⁴³⁰ Mary Titus, ‘The Dining Room Door Swings Both Ways: Food, Race and Domestic Space in the Nineteenth-Century South’, in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. by Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Chalottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997), pp.243-56 (p.243).

it.⁴³¹ This symbolic separation places the domestic space of the kitchen as a scene of tension but also as its own microcosm of slavery as an economic institution, because it is the location of production carried out, almost exclusively, for slave-owners through the labour, almost exclusively, of slaves. This disparity, too, undermines that notion of plantation homes being akin to cheerful houses such as those Dickens encountered in Richmond, because the separation in status of the white and black inhabitants still had to take account of their proximity within the plantation setting: they had by necessity to live alongside one another.

Notably, Chesnut does not refer to the challenges posed by living in close quarters with the enslaved inhabitants of the house. She does not interrogate the underlying reasons for her complaints about her own 'domestic strifes and troubles,' which are often directly related to the close proximity between mistress and (euphemistically termed) servant.⁴³² This factor is at least in part owing to the demarcations between mistress and slave within the house and the spatial dynamic that ensued. This dynamic is reflected in the architecture of the home, culminating in the tensions that belonged specifically to the kitchen.

Public rooms in plantation houses typically consisted of a parlour, a sitting room and a dining room. Private domestic spaces included chambers for the family and usually a library: these rooms were spaces where white slave-holders were served, and slaves entered them only to provide the services that allowed for the comfort of the white inhabitants. House servants sometimes occupied upper or attic rooms; otherwise, they slept in or near the rooms of their mistresses or the white children. But the one room that most clearly marked the tension between the role of mistress and female slaves is the aforementioned kitchen. Generally, the risk of fire meant that kitchens were located in outbuildings and they became the preserve of the black cook, whose duty was tied closely to that of her mistress, that of

⁴³¹ Titus, pp.245-6.

⁴³² Chesnut, *Diary*, p.45.

providing food for the family.⁴³³ The kitchen became contested because the mistress was responsible for making orders and deciding on menus but she relied on the skill and enterprise of the cook and her assistants to produce satisfactory meals. This applied to ordinary everyday provisions as well as the feasts that were the mainstay of many plantation homes. Although this role reflects that of any society hostess, it is complicated by race in relation to the Southern plantation because the best efforts of the white mistress could be sabotaged by her slaves as they carried out small acts of resistance, such as burning or over-seasoning food or allowing dishes to go cold.

Of all the slaves it was house servants who lived in closest proximity to the white family, meaning that they occupied a conflicted space of increased physical comforts but increased daily dealings with their owners. House slaves were often viewed by their masters as an elite class of slaves, but their work was not easy. As Weiner points out, 'for personal servants, particularly the plantation mistress's maid, duty often called twenty-four hours a day in a claustrophobic relationship.'⁴³⁴ Mistresses could promote or demote slaves and so the position of house slave was precarious. This consideration gives an added sense of menace to the privileged role of house servant. As Weiner continues, 'mistresses worked closely not only with house slaves but also with ordinary field hands in their roles as supervisors of domestic productivity.' Thus 'mistresses could interact directly with all of the female slaves on the plantations during their lives,' meaning that it was not only house slaves who were subject to their mistress's attention.⁴³⁵ However, it is certainly house servants, in particular ladies' maids, who were most subject to close scrutiny and this, too, is reflected in the emphasis placed on maids in those examples of retrospective plantation fiction in which the white mistress is foregrounded.

⁴³³ For more on the layout and function of plantation households see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, pp.102-107.

⁴³⁴ Brown and Webb, *Race in the American South*, p.142.

⁴³⁵ Weiner, p.39; p.40.

But it is not only the maid who registers the conflicts of such proximity; mistresses too recognise that this imposed closeness could be menacing. Several historical sources record mistress's fears that they will be poisoned or injured by malicious servants, no doubt owing to the 'strong antagonisms' Weiner identifies.⁴³⁶ An example is provided by Gwin, who records a story related by Chesnut. Her cousin Betsy was killed by her personal maid Rhoda and Chesnut fails to understand the motivation. Gwin reflects that

what Chesnut never seems to recognise, except perhaps subconsciously in her fear of black inscrutability, is the enormous frustration and explosive rage engendered by the simple fact of being a slave. Insightful though her remarks are otherwise, she seems blind to what it must be like to be a slave.⁴³⁷

This lack of understanding between mistress and slave is based on their simultaneous proximity yet enforced separation on racial grounds, but white women also occupied a separate dimension within their homes based on gender.

The notion of separate spheres for men and women was an established part of societal expectations in the antebellum period.⁴³⁸ However, this ethos had particular application in relation to the South. Stevenson offers the following helpful outline of the separate spheres mentality:

By the 1820's [sic], popular social architects envisioned spheres of human activity which, philosophically and practically separated the public from the private. They also envisioned a separation of the sexes, placing man in the public domain of the world and woman in the privacy of the home. In their ideal scenario the "home" was

⁴³⁶ Weiner, p.51.

⁴³⁷ Gwin, p.106.

⁴³⁸ The eighteenth-century European ideal of the home as a place of domestic bliss and as a 'separate sphere' from that of business and commerce had been established in American consciousness by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and embraced in southern culture. In England 'this typological conception of "domestic happiness" emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century, as the middle-class home, distanced in ideology and increasingly in fact from the place where money was made, became a "separate sphere" from the "fallen" world of work. (However, on the southern slave plantation, where work and the mercantile world of property were inseparable from the material facts of home, the space can be thought of as *unheimliche*.) Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p.ix.

the natural, idyllic “sphere” of woman where she provided her family with a “haven” from the corrupt, competitive sphere of men.⁴³⁹

This thinking becomes particularised to the Southern setting because the original notion does not encompass the role of black inhabitants within the plantation home, and many commentators of the time were exercised by how to clarify this disparity for the edification of white Southerners. One example of such a commentator is Henry Hughes, who typifies the separate spheres argument as it applied to Southern women. In 1856 he lectured in New Orleans on the dangers of women engaging in political debate, declaring that, ‘[a] baby is better fitting a woman than an oration, she is intended for home duties, labours and responsibilities [...] Nature has settled woman’s social status. They have not physical power to be anything more than home folk.’⁴⁴⁰ Of course a problem arises when the ideology has to take black women into account. Thinkers such as Thomas Drew, as well as Hughes, had difficulties here, because they wanted to make white women inferior to men but had to make them superior to black women who shared their biology. ‘Their often convoluted efforts to resolve this dilemma,’ according to Weiner, ‘reflect a uniquely Southern ideology of domesticity’: this ideology is most fully realised in the so-called cult of true womanhood that I discuss at length in the introduction to my thesis.⁴⁴¹

The ideals of true womanhood determined that Southern women were relegated to the domestic sphere in part because they had to submit to men in all public matters. Welter claims that submission was ‘perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women.’⁴⁴² Love was supposed to be ‘passive and responsive’ and women were not supposed to court fame or even success in their own right: ‘A wife who submerged her own talents to work for her

⁴³⁹ Stevenson, p.38.

⁴⁴⁰ Henry Hughes, *Selected Writing of Henry Hughes: Antebellum Southerner, Slavocrat, Sociologist*, ed. by Stanford M. Lyman (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985), pp.185-6, cited by Eugene Genovese in ‘Toward a Kinder and Gentler America: The Southern Lady in the Greening of the Politics of the Old South’, in *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Families, and Marriage in the Victorian South*, ed. by Carol Blesser (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.125-34 (p.128).

⁴⁴¹ Weiner, p.57.

⁴⁴² Welter, p. 27.

husband was extolled as an example of a true woman.’⁴⁴³ As they were discouraged from earning a living, white women were obliged to submit financially and they were not permitted to own property, as upheld by the Married Women’s Property Act in 1839. Upon marriage, women’s status changed from *femme sole* to *femme covert* and any property they did own was considered part of their husbands’ estates.⁴⁴⁴ All external business transactions on plantations were conducted by men. In terms of family and state the man was perceived as the head and the woman as subservient.

Southern women did enjoy the material benefits of wealth and the assistance of servants to help with menial tasks, but this did not mean a life of leisure for most women. Life on the plantation usually meant a very full round of household work. Although the white mistress’s role in her plantation home was predicated upon both race and gender, it was characterised primarily by duty. The white mistress on a Southern plantation quite literally carried the keys of the household. Women were responsible for managing the household budget and all of the domestic produce.⁴⁴⁵ This work included overseeing the dairy and poultry, the vegetable garden and the onerous task of the annual hog slaughter.⁴⁴⁶ ‘The round of obligations that absorbed women’s days, was long, varied and arduous,’ according to Weiner, and their lifestyle allowed little time for leisure and comfort.⁴⁴⁷ Moreover, life as a plantation mistress allowed little opportunity for solitude because the role involved constant interaction with the slaves: the mistress was typically supervising the slaves’ work, but she was simultaneously subject to scrutiny and judgement, making the plantation a claustrophobic location. The tension between admitting privilege, recognising responsibilities and enduring a sense of being

⁴⁴³ Welter, p.29.

⁴⁴⁴ McMillen, p.40.

⁴⁴⁵ See Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, pp.23-4.

⁴⁴⁶ Every part of a pig could be utilised and white women oversaw and assisted with processing the bristles for brushes and rendering fat into tallow for candles as well as preparing sausages, bacon and other cuts for meat, along with the *chitterlings* that were given to slaves for food. This involved time-consuming, unpleasant work.

⁴⁴⁷ Weiner, p.25.

simultaneously trapped and scrutinised served to make living on a plantation potentially a deeply challenging prospect for the white mistress.

Prior to retrospective plantation fiction, fiction about slavery has long taken on a Gothic cast, not least in relation to the abolitionist agenda.⁴⁴⁸ The brutal Legree plantation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is presented as hell-like, a place that derides the presence of God. It is described as 'desolate and uncomfortable', with slave cabins that are 'rude shanties' with a 'forlorn, brutal forsaken air.'⁴⁴⁹ Stowe uses many of the conventions of sentimental fiction and uses a Gothic idiom in her descriptions of the horrors of slavery as part of her abolitionist strategy.⁴⁵⁰ For example, Simon Legree's reaction to the fear of his home being haunted by his righteous mother is recorded with Gothic excess: 'There is a dread, unhallowed necromancy of evil, that turns things sweetest and holiest to phantoms of horror and affright,' so that even before Cassy devises an elaborate ruse to convince Legree that his home is inhabited by a ghost, the whole plantation becomes figured as a haunted space.⁴⁵¹ *Our Nig* also deploys Gothic language to describe Frado's home-life. Although admittedly it is not set in a Southern plantation but in 'a two-storey white house, North,' it certainly operates as a site of slavery.⁴⁵² As she approaches the Bellmont abode, 'the child seemed to have some dim foreshadowing of evil' and Wilson details years of abuse suffered by Frado at the hands of her mistress's 'unrestrained malice' and 'dangerous passion.'⁴⁵³ Jacobs also uses Gothic language to convey her abolitionist message in her

⁴⁴⁸ Gothic tends to interrogate binaries such as white and black and good and evil. Fred Botting notes that 'Gothic fiction can be said to blur rather than distinguish the boundaries that regulate social life, and interrogate, rather than restore, any imagined continuity between past and present, nature and culture, reason and passion, individuality and family and society.' Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.47.

⁴⁴⁹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p.319; p.321.

⁴⁵⁰ For more on Stowe's use of the conventions of sentimental fiction see Tompkins, 'Sentimental Power,' pp.501-22. For more on Stowe's use of the Gothic see Karen Halttunen, 'Gothic Imagination and Social Reform, The Haunted Houses of Lyman Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe', in *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.107-134.

⁴⁵¹ For more on Gothic excess see Susanne Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp.25-32.

⁴⁵² Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.1, facsimile title page from 1859 edition.

⁴⁵³ Wilson, *Our Nig*, p.12; p.46.

fictionalised autobiography.⁴⁵⁴ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* describes the words of her master, for example as ‘stinging, scorching words that scathed ear and brain like fire’ and he is referred to as a ‘vile monster’ whilst her mistress is portrayed as consumed by ‘jealousy and rage,’ making their home a place of terror for the slave girl.⁴⁵⁵ A connection between the literary Gothic and slavery is a natural part of abolitionist writing.⁴⁵⁶

Later fiction about slavery may not have an abolitionist agenda, but it continues to draw upon Gothic tropes and language.⁴⁵⁷ *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* combines its tone of elegy with a sense of the Gothic. The novel records that in the twenty-five years since Nancy’s escape and her return when Cather is a child, ‘the country between Romney and Winchester had changed very little.’⁴⁵⁸ There is a tone of nostalgia and reverence for the past. A sense of the home functioning as a Gothic space is also conveyed because it is a place where the slave girl, Nancy, is trapped by circumstances and her mistress’s malice, and the mistress herself is trapped by her ailing body and jealous conjectures.

Later retrospective plantation fiction records many incidents and inconsistencies that make the plantation a horrific location for slaves and mistresses.⁴⁵⁹ Indeed, the slave plantation continues to engage the interest

⁴⁵⁴ For more on Jacobs’s use of Gothic conventions see John Haus, ‘Perilous Passages in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*’, in *The Discourse of Slavery, Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, ed. by Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.144-65.

⁴⁵⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.18; p.26.

⁴⁵⁶ There is an established canon of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American fiction that uses Gothic to explore race either explicitly or obliquely. Examples include Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ (1843), Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ (1855), Kate Chopin’s ‘Desiree’s Baby’ (1893), Stephen Crane’s ‘The Monster’ (1898) and William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932).

⁴⁵⁷ Gothic is a fluid medium; it refuses to be contained or delimited by fixed definitions. Gothic is a form of fantasy that draws on the Greek denotation of fantasy as that which is made visible, or manifest. In terms of retrospective plantation fiction, the desire to uncover aspects of the history of slavery is invoked. This project mirrors Charles Crow’s understanding of American Gothic, in that it ‘has enabled a dialogue to exist instead of a single story, and has given a voice to people, and fears otherwise left silent’. Charles L. Crow, *American Gothic: An Anthology 1787-1916* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p.1.

⁴⁵⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.273.

⁴⁵⁹ Marse John and Big Missy in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), for example, simultaneously consider their relationship with their slaves to be just like ‘a family’ but also insist on ‘rigorously maintaining control over their property, both land and chattel slaves’ (p. 82).

of novelists writing at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.⁴⁶⁰ Certainly the sense that the white mistress is harrowed by the violence of slavery remains a concern in retrospective plantation fiction and this concern, too, plays out in the use of Gothic as a medium.⁴⁶¹ This is also the case in *Property*. The novel had an original title of *Hatred*, changed because of its resemblance to Morrison's *Beloved*; this change is noteworthy because it emphasises the latent emotion that presides in the plantation home and that is the purview of slavery fiction.⁴⁶² What retrospective plantation fiction contributes to an understanding of these latent emotions is executed specifically through recourse to portraying the plantation as a Gothic space. Homes in retrospective plantation fiction are characterised by claustrophobia and voyeurism for both the mistress and her slaves, as I argue here.⁴⁶³ And it is the combination of feeling trapped, scrutinised and subject to the sense of occupying a home-that-is-not-a-home, emblematic of *das unheimliche* at work, that makes the plantation home a place in which the threat of physical or psychic violence is a constant factor of the experience of both female slaves and their white mistresses.

Das Unheimliche: The Plantation Home as the Uncanny⁴⁶⁴

The plantation home acts as a Gothic locus and is central to revisiting slavery. Alan Lloyd Smith posits that 'the Gothic is about the *return* of the

⁴⁶⁰ *Beloved* is probably the best known example of a Gothic retelling of slavery because the very opening line declares that the house, although on this occasion not a plantation, is haunted. Morrison's novel suggests that slavery is something that haunts the homes of America as a legacy.

⁴⁶¹ Martin also features violence in *The Great Divorce* (1994). This novel tells the story of Elizabeth Schlaeger of Rosedawn Plantation in New Orleans, who on the night of July 10th 1845 is found with her hands 'stained with blood to the wrists' and her husband beside her with 'his throat [...] entirely torn away'. *The Great Divorce* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 29. The emphasis in this novel is not on the slaves but rather the relationship between a mistress and her brutal husband, but slavery is instrumental in her manifest savagery.

⁴⁶² Liz Bury, 'Interview with Valerie Martin', *The Bookseller*, 58, 5th December 2003, p.1.

⁴⁶³ For more on voyeurism as a feature of Gothic fiction see Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.148-54.

⁴⁶⁴ I briefly draw on Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny' but I also recognise that the uncanny is (uncannily) difficult to define. Nicholas Royle has a lengthy account of what constitutes the uncanny. Some examples in this lengthy list include challenges to one's personal integrity, any crisis over property or propriety, a sense of fate or destiny, things that are frightening and yet beautiful, awareness of the self and others and othering, one's primary space feeling disturbed or unsettled and, the sense that things are the same and yet altered. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003) pp.1-38.

past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself,' and it is the return of the repressed past of American slavery that is excavated in these narratives.⁴⁶⁵ There is a direct correlation between the uncanny, or *unheimliche*, and the plantation home because of the connection between the *heimliche*, or familiar, and the sense of 'dread' that Sigmund Freud identifies as central to the notion of 'what is uncanny,' that which he notes is 'frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.'⁴⁶⁶ It is the synchronic nature of an abode that is at once 'home' and 'not home' with which retrospective plantation fiction engages, because the master or mistress has control over the space he or she occupies but the slave is subject to control within that same space. As well as occupying the site of the return of the repressed past of slavery, and examining effects of the unfamiliar juxtaposed with the familiar, characterised by the experience of both slaves and mistresses, the plantation setting is also depicted as a site that is inhabited by the double. Freud considers the double, or *doppelgänger*, to have been an invention typified by the immortal soul, but argues that this creation, which initially served as 'an assurance of immortality,' eventually comes to represent a 'ghastly harbinger of death.'⁴⁶⁷ I argue that the female slave is figured as an uncanny double for the white mistress and this device, too, is seen in the novels' attention to perplexity at the imminence of the mistress's own death as it manifests itself in fear or loathing of the slave who shares her home.

The setting of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* on the Double-S Road, a road that doubles back on itself, neatly symbolises Cather's return to the history of slavery within her own family in her final novel.⁴⁶⁸ Not only does Cather represent her childhood home in Virginia in the novel, but she also returns to what Jacobs identifies in her preface to *Incidents in the Life of a*

⁴⁶⁵ Alan Lloyd Smith, *American Gothic* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p.1; emphasis in original.

⁴⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by David McLintock (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp.123-5; emphasis in original.

⁴⁶⁷ Freud, p.142.

⁴⁶⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.115.

Slave Girl as the ‘monstrous features’ of slavery.⁴⁶⁹ As recorded in the novel, the monstrous features in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* apply to the white mistress Sapphira as well as to the incidents relating to her slave, Nancy. The Mill Farm becomes a place of horror for both mistress and slave. I agree with Janis P. Stout, who argues that ‘the vision of home that the book conveys (in Sapphira’s house at any rate) is one in which home is a site of sickness, imprisonment, and sharply restricted possibility, for white as well as for black.’⁴⁷⁰ Returning to the past to offer a consideration of Cather’s ancestors, the novel posits that both the white mistress and her slave are restricted: Sapphira by her illness and her sense of society’s expectations and Nancy by virtue of being a slave. The story of Sapphira’s jealousy of her slave, her plan to have her raped and Nancy’s subsequent escape with the help of Sapphira’s daughter Rachel, as well as her ultimate return to her childhood home, are the repressed incidents of history that resurface in the novel as it enacts a narrative doubling-back of sorts. Newman identifies the heart of the *unheimliche* here. Reflecting on the novel, she writes that ‘slavery is the original sin in the American garden, its discursive power an invasive, shifting, and interactive presence’ and it is the discursive power that comes to the fore in the excavation of Cather family history in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.⁴⁷¹

The white and black inhabitants exist within their own racially dictated spheres, and Newman develops her argument compellingly to claim that ‘out of this garden are built two houses, not worlds apart but worlds within each other.’⁴⁷² The sense that there are two co-existing worlds is witnessed in the topography of the novel, as there are two distinct geographical areas, each with its own conventions. The Mill Farm is described as neat and orderly, and it has its own confines represented by the ‘box-hedged walks.’ Behind the house, where the slave quarters are

⁴⁶⁹ Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.6.

⁴⁷⁰ Janis P. Stout, ‘Playing in the Mother Country: Cather, Morrison and the Return to Virginia’, in *Willa Cather’s Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp.189-97 (p.191).

⁴⁷¹ Shelley Newman, ‘No Place Like Home’, p.54.

⁴⁷² Newman, p.54.

located, the buildings exist in 'a helter-skelter scattering, like a small village.'⁴⁷³ That these two homesteads are interdependent gives rise to the sense of the unfamiliar residing within the familiar, for the reason that inhabitants only belong to one of the worlds or the other, underscoring the impression of the Dodderidge home as an uncanny dwelling. Of course, these differences are not simply genteel distinctions; the material fact that the black residents are slaves whilst the white family members are their owners is never far from the surface, also contributing to the *unheimliche* atmosphere and undermines notions of comfort and stability that are usually associated with the idea of home. Home is destabilised not only by the two different worlds that co-exist alongside one another, but by the disparity of independence and power that operates in each of the worlds. This power differential is most marked between Sapphira and her slaves, although, as Newman points out, 'there is not one completely safe home in the novel,' and where there is security it is only for the white characters.⁴⁷⁴

Sapphira attempts to impose security on her surroundings. The centre of her influence, the parlour, is described as a room with 'an air of settled comfort and stability.' Sapphira is able to reflect on this stability afforded to herself and her husband when she says to him, 'Take it all in, though, we have had many happy years here, and we both love the place. Neither of us would be easy anywhere else.'⁴⁷⁵ Sapphira's slave is certainly not allowed the same level of security. As Susan Rosowski notes, 'as Sapphira carries out her plan against Nancy, the house in which the girl is trapped becomes an ominous labyrinth, complete with stock Gothic elements—ancestral secrets; hints of incest; long, drafty, dark halls [and] creaking stairs.'⁴⁷⁶ Yet in Cather's novel stock elements *per se* are transcended because the psychic aspects of their impact on Nancy resonate. Nancy reflects that if Martin had ever raped her as planned then she would have been destroyed, but she still clings to the only home she knows: 'But it was still hers: the home folks and

⁴⁷³ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.20.

⁴⁷⁴ Newman, pp.54-64 (p.57).

⁴⁷⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.41; p.269.

⁴⁷⁶ Susan J. Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p.236.

the home place and the precious feeling of belonging here. Maybe that fright back there in the dark hall had been just a bad dream. Out here it didn't seem true.⁴⁷⁷ Despite the sense of threat, Nancy still recognises the Mill Farm and Dodderidge holdings as the only home she has ever known, resonating with the *unheimliche* because it offers both the security of familiarity and the menace of the unfamiliar in the threat posed by Martin. Nancy's experience comes to reflect that of the archetypal Gothic heroine in that 'under the villain's control, the home becomes not a sanctuary from terror but a source of it.'⁴⁷⁸ Her fears are not dreams; instead Sapphira's power over what happens to all in her household is summed up by Nancy's victimhood and ensuing lack of security.

Sapphira's lack of security in her physical body also figures as *unheimliche* in the novel. Death is never far from the surface of the text, featuring, for instance, in the 'dark revelations' that Rosowski identifies, such as Till watching her mother burn to death when she was a child.⁴⁷⁹ But it also exists in the *topos* of the white mistress's home. This preoccupation is exemplified in the family's graveyard where 'a wide gravelled path divided the square plot in two halves' and 'on one side were the family graves, with marble headstones', whereas 'on the other side was the slaves' graveyard, with slate headstones bearing single names.' Despite the disparity between owners and owned, death naturally acts as a leveller, as is acknowledged in the novel: 'the mounds of masters and servants alike were covered with thick mats of myrtle.'⁴⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the appearance of the graves in the novel acts as a *memento mori*, testament to Sapphira's increasing decrepitude. The graveyard also calls to mind the operation of the *doppelganger* in the novel because it elicits a comparison between the living and the dead which casts additional light on the comparison between the mistress and her slave here. Sapphira's fear of physical decline and death motivates her insecurity about

⁴⁷⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.197.

⁴⁷⁸ Ferguson Ellis, p.46.

⁴⁷⁹ Rosowski, p.237.

⁴⁸⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.101.

Nancy's perceived attractiveness, although to see her as a 'grotesque' and a 'nightmarish life-in-death figure,' as does Rosowski, is to put too much emphasis on her physical decline.⁴⁸¹ This is because even the repellent descriptions of the mistress's 'very plump white hands' and 'wax-white swollen knees', are mediated with more pleasing descriptions of 'her serene face and lively, shallow blue eyes.'⁴⁸² Rather, it is more that the mistress's declining body operates metonymically as a vehicle of *das unheimliche* because it represents the crumbling Usheresque mansion. The mistress here is the *unheimliche*, in that the deterioration of her physical body represents the internal corruption of the system of chattel slavery.

Sutton Glen in *Dessa Rose* is another *unheimliche* site. This novel also effects a return to the slave South and here, too, the repressed story of slavery resurfaces. In an aside in her narrative Dessa opines that, 'They tell you now about the gloried South; South wasn't so gloried back then honey.'⁴⁸³ But it is not simply reluctance to glorify the antebellum South that typifies the novel's return; in *Dessa Rose*, Williams declares her interest in 'what has been acceptably sayable about that story,' because she is concerned with the *received* narrative of slavery.⁴⁸⁴ The novel acknowledges that a project to restore the complete story of slavery would not be possible. For example, Dessa admits she has not revealed everything to Ruth, saying that 'I told her some things' but 'these was still a wound to me.'⁴⁸⁵ This exemplifies McDowell's evaluation that the novel rejects an idea of 'truth' but does posit some 'certainties' about slavery.⁴⁸⁶

As in all historical fiction, there is much that necessarily remains undisclosed and this is witnessed in the topography of this novel. Much of the sense of returning to an unfinished story is symbolised in particular by the Sutton Glen's unfinished storey. The Sutton Plantation is portrayed

⁴⁸¹ Rosowski, p.240.

⁴⁸² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.6; p.28; p.32.

⁴⁸³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.210.

⁴⁸⁴ Sherley Anne Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p.ix.

⁴⁸⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.216.

⁴⁸⁶ McDowell, p. 145.

emblematically as incomplete as the story because ‘they had never gotten far enough ahead to complete the second storey’ and the slave quarters consist of ‘only one room with a dirt floor.’⁴⁸⁷ The space itself exemplifies *das unheimliche* because of its ambiguity: it is unhomely by being open to the elements so that outside becomes inside and vice versa.⁴⁸⁸

The Sutton Plantation is known in the neighbourhood as ‘that flashy house’ and much is made by Bertie of the ‘Georgian facade’ of the ‘House’ that would ‘gleam whitely, through the trees, as fleeting as a dream, lost from sight as the Road dipped, the river curled, hidden again by the trees.’⁴⁸⁹ In this description of the plantation, given to Ruth by her future husband, the capitalisation is in the original, suggesting the importance of place and of owning property and being committed to plantation ideals. Yet Bertie absconds, unable to finish his part of the story. Not only is the house viewed disparagingly by the neighbours as being ‘flashy’, or overly ambitious (as is Bertie himself), but the whole is predicated upon an image, a facade. That it is further both dream-like and ‘hidden’ is again reminiscent of the repressed past of slavery that is elucidated for the white mistress and, at least partially, brought to light in the narrative. Indeed, that the home, much like Ruth, is masquerading as something it is not is exposed when Dessa exclaims that, ‘them rooms was big all right, but it was only two of them, same as any poor buckra; and that stairway didn’t lead to no other storey.’⁴⁹⁰

Additionally, paradoxical or incomplete ‘homes’ feature throughout *Dessa Rose*. Before arriving at Sutton Glen Dessa is held captive in a root cellar, but this place inspires the ‘root’ of her rebellion. In this compromised space there is an echo of the ‘loophole of retreat’ referred to by Jacobs in

⁴⁸⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.108 and p.165.

⁴⁸⁸ Ambiguous domestic spaces occur frequently in writing about slavery. Karen Sanchez Eppler considers Jacobs’s longing for the domestic in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: ‘unlike the heroes of slave narratives, Linda escapes not by fighting or running away but by burrowing into domestic spaces. Linda, Jacobs’s alter ego “haunts” but “cannot occupy” the domestic spaces identified throughout the text.’ Karen Sanchez Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body* (Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p.87.

⁴⁸⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.105.

⁴⁹⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.164.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, the attic crawl space she describes as 'like a coffin' that she lived in for seven years, a space that was both a prison and a place of freedom from her tormentor.⁴⁹¹ The root cellar allows Dessa to retreat from Nehemiah's questions, but being there also resembles being buried alive.

For Dessa, Sutton Glen Plantation also becomes an *unheimliche* space. When she is rescued by Harker and Nathan and brought to Ruth's home, Ruth insists that the injured girl be placed in her own bed in her chamber. This insistence means that Dessa is situated within the white domestic space of the plantation home, but she cannot feel at home as Ruth does because she is not the mistress. Ruth's version of her bedroom is a positive space, although she acknowledges that it must be foreign to Dessa. Ruth notes that 'it was a spacious and light-filled chamber, handsomely proportioned and stylishly finished from the highly polished golden-oak flooring to the long, French-style windows that faced the morning sun.' She realises that Dessa must have been terrified to find herself in a real bed, noting that, 'even in her fevered state she would know that no darky could own a room like this.' And so the bedroom becomes a particularly ambiguous space in this novel, simultaneously occupied by mistress and slave. A sense of trespass is evoked, and on this occasion it is the fact that the bed is the rightful space of the mistress and yet comes to be occupied by the slave that contributes to the sense of *unheimliche*. This is further emphasised when Dessa acknowledges the bed as both 'grave and birthing place' for herself.⁴⁹² In this, the most extreme *unheimliche* space, the grave, intrudes on the most archetypical domestic space—a space more readily associated with birth—the bed. Just as Nancy needs to run away before she can return as a free woman, so Dessa must be reborn in Ruth's chamber. So where Ruth sees her white bedroom as representative of all that is comfortable and familiar, to Dessa its very whiteness is threatening and dispossessing, despite the domestic setting.

⁴⁹¹ Jacobs uses the expression 'loophole of retreat' (p.91) but she did not coin the phrase, which comes from the poem 'The Task' by William Cowper (1785).

⁴⁹² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.93-4; p.197.

The patriarchal order and racially constructed power dynamic are completely over-turned in the slave selling scheme that Ruth, Dessa and her friends enact. This coincides with Dessa's fulfilment of her own potential, but also demonstrates how the sense of *unheimliche* extends beyond the domestic space of the plantation. Harker, who initiates the scheme, is determined to dominate the space he occupies and to revise the notion of home. Regarding Harker, Dessa says that 'we all belonged to a place and seemed like you was born knowing not to move too far from it. But here was someone who walked around where he wanted to—more or less—wasn't scared to do this.'⁴⁹³

The temerity of Ruth and her fellow conspirators reverses all socially sanctioned notions of home in the South because the scheme parodies roles on an actual plantation. Here, then, the unfamiliar residing within the familiar is achieved by the extraordinary events of slaves agreeing to sell themselves for profit with the aid of a pseudo-mistress who acts out a charade of being exactly that: a white mistress. Anne E. Trapasso is convincing when she claims that 'the story becomes increasingly fantastic as the characters leave Sutton Glen,' and it seems that Gothic reversals are allowed by the very irony of each of the conspirators adopting pre-assigned roles.⁴⁹⁴ Yet instead of subscribing to the double-standards of the slave system, Ruth assists the former slaves as, according to Mitchell, 'they plan to profit economically by signifying on the institution of slavery so that they can be economically enfranchised instead of economically disenfranchised.'⁴⁹⁵ By leaving the plantation, Ruth is able to distance herself from social conventions by embracing the uncanny in the double-bluff she performs.

Ruth is still forced to confront the racial prejudices that persist in her interactions with Dessa. By living in close proximity to Dessa and the other

⁴⁹³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.180.

⁴⁹⁴ Ann E. Trapasso, 'Returning to the Site of Violence: The Restructuring of Slavery's Legacy in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*', in *Violence, Silence and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, ed. by Deirdre Lashgari (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp.219-30 (p.222).

⁴⁹⁵ Mitchell, p.82.

slaves, both in Sutton Glen and when they take their scheme out on the road, Ruth learns to confront her own vulnerability. As I discussed at length earlier, she is no longer able to keep the slaves' different condition to her own at a remove by insisting that their screams are kept out of earshot of the mistress. Whilst Ruth is by no means subject to the physical punishments and deprivations that have been imposed on Dessa, she does suffer a physical assault at the hands of Mr Oscar and she learns that she cannot rely on her status as a white woman to protect her. Neither, she realises, is she fully free either. In fact, at one point she acknowledges that if Bertie were to return she would have 'no more rights than the slaves,' and consequently she cannot rely on her independence. But, despite the fact that Ruth is not subject to the same physical violence as Dessa, she does manage to feel empathy and when, regarding Dessa's painful scars, she admits that she 'could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench's thighs', the mistress experiences a kind of *unheimliche* doubling with the slave.⁴⁹⁶ In this doubling *Dessa Rose* explores the interconnectedness of the slave and the mistress that is an inescapable part of slavery's legacy.

Property directly confronts the repressed legacy of slavery by allowing a minute account of the white mistress's home-life, including Manon's own reflections on her domestic arrangements. And whilst in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* there are ambiguities in the portrayal of Back Creek, which reveal the author's fondness for her childhood home, and in *Dessa Rose* the Sutton Plantation at times becomes a sanctuary of sorts for the slaves, the Gaudet Plantation in *Property* is presented without any such equivocation, as a wholly forbidding place. According to Oates, 'the exhausting burdens of slaveholding' and 'the excruciating weight of its machinery' make the plantation 'a world of ceaseless, tension and anxiety,' in relation to this novel. I agree with Oates that slave-owners' 'obsession with their intransigent and always unpredictable negro property' contributes to this

⁴⁹⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.162; p.135.

state of insecurity.⁴⁹⁷ It is this tension and anxiety that determine both Manon's actions and her unhappiness. This is also what defines the Gaudet Plantation as an *unheimliche* space, because whilst the white people ought to feel the security of mastery, they instead feel the insecurity of never being able to trust their human property. The theme of insurrection and the sense of menace encountered by Manon also underscore this feeling of *unheimliche* in the novel. As I have already argued, few fictional texts about slavery dwell as considerably on the experience and feelings of the white mistress as does *Property*, and in this the novel confronts the unsayable about slavery from the perspective of the owner, revealing the circumstances of her home-life.⁴⁹⁸

That *Property* opens up a space for the white mistress to express her grievances is only the start of the novel's exploration of a previously repressed past. As discussed previously, one of the most specific difficulties posed by slave-owning is miscegenation, and in this the child Walter represents the return of the repressed. Manon draws upon the language of the Gothic to describe him as 'this monster' her husband had 'brought among us' and it is precisely his residence in her home that contributes to the sense of *unheimliche* here.⁴⁹⁹ *Property* achieves this in part by presenting a deeply unwelcoming, insecure home. From the beginning of the novel Manon remarks on her discomfort at having to listen to the overseer discuss whippings 'at breakfast,' and she admits that she is determined to make Gaudet feel just as uncomfortable in his own home as punishment for her unease. She records, 'I looked at him for a few moments blankly, without comment, as if he was speaking a foreign language. This unnerves him.' What Manon's narrative reveals is the extent to which the white mistress feels alienated in her plantation home. Indeed, neither slave nor mistress

⁴⁹⁷ Oates, p.138.

⁴⁹⁸ The concept of the 'unsayable' in relation to slavery and fiction is discussed at length by Toni Morrison in 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', The Tanner Lecture on Human Values, University of Michigan, October 7th, 1988.

⁴⁹⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.37; p.41. Chris Baldick argues that the term monster as it applies to Gothic fiction suggests both someone who goes against nature and someone who is offered up as a warning to others of the consequences of immoral actions. Chris Baldick, 'The Politics of Monstrosity' in *New Casebooks: Frankenstein*, ed. by Fred Botting (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.48-67.

feels secure on the Gaudet Plantation. The kitchen is a pivotal site in relation to this lack of security for the women. At Manon's uncle's home, Sarah is tied up and whipped in the kitchen 'in front of the cook.'⁵⁰⁰ And whilst Manon feels at home in the kitchen, away from her husband's 'summons', yet she acknowledges that it is the domain of her slave Delphine, the cook, and so her presence is tolerated there but she is not welcome.⁵⁰¹ *Property* makes it clear that the discomfort and alienation occasioned on the plantation extends to encompass the white mistress and unsettles her well-being.

The plantation as a destabilised environment is also present in *Property*; here, the Gaudet Plantation figures as a kind of Usheresque crumbling mansion in a similar way to the Sutton Plantation of *Dessa Rose*. In this case, the house is described as having an upstairs gallery that is 'wide and closed in by a rail', but with a porch below that is 'open to whatever stumbles across the brick floor, lizards, snakes, and every kind of beetle the swamps can disgorge.' This description presages the house's vulnerability to invasion. Manon wills the destruction of her corrupt environment by the rodents that she hears in the roof space. She reveals: 'Good, I thought. Eat a little every day until it all falls down around our ears,' and these thoughts foreshadows the destruction wreaked on the night of the insurrection. Manon's attitude towards the destruction of her home is commensurate with this white mistress's desire that her husband too be destroyed when she declares that 'though his ruin entails my own, I long for it,' suggesting a violent internal struggle.⁵⁰² This novel extends the *unheimliche* nature of the plantation from the unfinished home in *Dessa Rose* to a dismantled home. The rebel slaves destroy the table, the focal point of her husband's influence in the neighbourhood because it is where he entertains his guests, but they also destroy the spyglass, the symbol of his tyranny: 'The spyglass was dismantled and lay in pieces on the carpet, there was the gashes in the dining table, a curtain down, a mirror shattered

⁵⁰⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.5; p.8; p.9.

⁵⁰¹ Martin, *Property*, p.21; p.43.

⁵⁰² Martin, *Property*, p.21; p.53; p.18.

so that only glass splinters remained in the frame [and there were] shot holes in the wall.’ The novel reveals the destruction of the plantation as a seat of power. Instead of domesticity the plantation home is built on a false sense of security, an edifice of what Manon refers to as ‘lies without end’ and this is instead the source of destruction.⁵⁰³

It is not only the building of the home that is destroyed in *Property* as the symbolism is extended to suggest the damage caused to both slaves and slave-owners in the novel. Like that of Sapphira, Manon’s body also comes to represent an *unheimliche* site. Here, too, this sense is figured in the perplexity at the imminence of one’s own physical demise which is exacerbated by the existence of a double. In this case Manon sustains physical injuries that arguably represent both her flawed character and her complicity with slavery. Manon is shot in the shoulder on the night of the rebellion.⁵⁰⁴ She learns that she will ‘never recover the use of [her] arm.’ Her face is scarred and she acknowledges that few women could ‘entertain the possibility of such disfigurement with equanimity.’⁵⁰⁵ Manon sees her physical scars as a reminder that she is no longer a ‘marriageable commodity’ and that neither the ‘myopic’ suitor Mr Duffossat, presented to her by her aunt, nor her preferred beau, Joel Borden, will desire a ‘poor crippled widow.’⁵⁰⁶

The fact that she gains a kind of freedom by not having to marry is marred because Manon is only nominally free because of others’ servitude, and this limitation is marked in her lack of wholeness. Indeed, this, too, involves the doubling of mistress and slave because Manon and Sarah are effectively tethered together at the end of the narrative as Manon refuses to part with Sarah and Sarah has no access to freedom. Oates’ reflections here

⁵⁰³ Martin, *Property*, p.145; p.52.

⁵⁰⁴ That Manon is physically scarred echoes Dana’s experience in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979). The first thing that Dana reveals in her narrative is that she ‘lost an arm’ but also ‘much of the comfort and security’ that she knew during her fantastical visits to antebellum Maryland (p.9). But whilst for Dana the loss of an arm represents the gain of wisdom and understanding about the past, because her visits expand her experience, for Manon her physical impediments reflect her helplessness.

⁵⁰⁵ Martin, *Property*, p.133; p.137.

⁵⁰⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.172; p.194.

are instructive; she posits a bizarre 'marriage' between the two women. She argues that, 'by the novel's end, a grotesque but utterly plausible new marriage has evolved: Manon with her scarred face and paralysed arm, Sarah sullen and recalcitrant, the deaf-mute Walter their child.'⁵⁰⁷ Even though the action of the novel has shifted away from the plantation to Manon's desired home in the city, the uncomfortable closeness and doubling of mistress and slave is captured perfectly in this scene of mutual misery. What this scene also achieves is to leave the novel with the sense of *unheimliche* unrelieved, in that the image of Manon and Sarah, staring sullenly into the fire on either side of the mantle, is at once familiar and yet incongruous because it does not fulfil the expected image of a husband and wife. Neither of the women is now aligned with Gaudet and both of them have been denied marriage to a man of her choice, Joel Borden in the case of Manon and Mr Roget in the case of Sarah, because they are both embroiled in the institution of slavery, and this consideration renders their current relationship, or marriage in Oates's estimation, illegitimate because it somewhat mimics, but does not fulfil, a conventional marriage.

It is the illegitimate nature of slavery that makes the plantation home an *unheimliche* space. The fiction explored here insists on presenting the plantation as a Gothic site, imbued with the opposite of domestic bliss, as well as occupying the return of the repressed past of slavery. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* the home offers safety only to the mistress who is at liberty to orchestrate harm against her slave and it is Sapphira's cruelty that renders Nancy's home an unsafe place. Nancy's body comes to represent the unattainable ideal as Sapphira strains against her own damaged body. These elements of the *unheimliche* are also represented in *Dessa Rose*, in which the unfinished plantation fails to live up to Ruth's expectations and instead provides an unhomely habitation. *Dessa Rose* offers insights into the mistress's increased understanding of her own limitations based on her awareness of her slave's physical impairments and suffering. And it is in *Property* that a fuller reflection of the Southern plantation as an *unheimliche*

⁵⁰⁷ Oates, p.140.

place is achieved because it is here that the lack of comfort and familiarity as well as the damage, both physical and psychological, caused to the white mistress is most fully realised. Manon's first-person revelations, characterised by a language of excess, demonstrate her revulsion at her living conditions and also the lack of security and fear that she experiences, so that in *Property* the Gothic fully resonates. The three homes in these retrospective fictions can, I argue, be said to follow a trajectory in terms of interrogating the *unheimliche* plantation setting. This trajectory is seen in the move from the idealisation of the home in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, where the slave shanties are hidden and the mistress takes satisfaction from her home, to the destabilisation of the home in *Dessa Rose*, symbolised both by the unfinished storey of the mansion and the invented story that facilitates the slave-selling scheme. The trajectory culminates with the dismantled home in *Property*. Here the repressed past of slavery is openly confronted in the person of Walter and the fate of both Sarah and Manon as the plantation is abandoned altogether, although the shadow of slavery follows Manon when she insists on bringing her slaves to the city and hence the illegitimacy of the institution prevails beyond the confines of the plantation.

Claustrophobia: The Plantation as a Place of Exile and Imprisonment

The feelings of confinement caused by living on the plantation are subject to interrogation in retrospective fiction. Not only is the plantation home characterised by its *unheimliche* nature, it is also a space marked by claustrophobia. Certainly the female slave is trapped in the confines of the plantation, but the mistress is similarly trapped. Here, I examine the ways in which the environs of the white mistress's home act as a place of self-imposed exile in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Dessa Rose* and *Property*. I also consider how the slave's condition is questioned in retrospective plantation fiction, because, whilst literally unfree, the fictional female slaves also experience at least a taste of freedom. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira becomes confined to her home whilst Nancy escapes to Canada; in *Dessa Rose*, Dessa travels to the West of the country as part of a new

community of equals, and although the white mistress does not return to her plantation, Ruth is forced to travel alone to the East of the country to resume her place among white society; and, in *Property*, Sarah experiences a brief period of exhilarating freedom whilst Manon remains entangled in the system of slavery even after the Gaudet Plantation is sold. I explore claustrophobia as it is experienced by the white mistress in these novels and how each of the fictional plantations acts as a microcosm to expose the mistress's place and often displacement within slave-owning society.

The Dodderidge holdings in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are set apart from their neighbours because Back Creek 'isn't a slave-owning neighbourhood.' The place itself in the 'Virginia backwoods' is remote and is deliberately chosen by Sapphira as 'her place of exile' after her unconventional marriage to her social inferior Henry Colbert. This is because Sapphira's home is isolated: from her first sight of the Mill Farm, Till 'had felt buried in the deep woods.'⁵⁰⁸ Here, too, is a sense of the hidden or repressed past of slavery. The place is closeted, as well as suggesting Gothic entombment, with the *topoi* of the grave and the forest. Yet, in more practical terms of reference, the remote setting allows this place to operate as its own fiefdom. By moving her entourage to this location, Sapphira makes the Mill Farm the only slave-owning property in the environs and hence the only place where the lives of the servants are fully subject to the dictates of their owners.

From the beginning the sense that Nancy is confined is expressed: even before the arrival of Martin she never tells lies for her own benefit, but only 'to escape from something.' But it is when Sapphira's plan to have her slave raped is instigated with Martin's visit to the Mill Farm that Nancy's claustrophobia most resonates. From the outset his relation to her is presented as ominous: 'Nancy didn't like his laugh, not at all!'⁵⁰⁹ Nancy starts to feel trapped in the house as she listens, frightened of Martin. She even threatens to kill herself because at night 'he's right over [her] at the top

⁵⁰⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.8; p.4; p.25; p.72.

⁵⁰⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.44; p.157.

of the stairs,' this position signalling his superior position in the household.⁵¹⁰ Moreover, Nancy is aware that if he did anything then she would be blamed; she exclaims: 'If I hollered, the mistress would put it all on me; she'd say I done somethin' to make him think I was a bad girl.'⁵¹¹ The slave is trapped between the physical threat of her assailant and the psychological threat of her mistress's reproach and the ensuing consequences. Hence the place that operates as an exile for Sapphira, because it is her safe haven, doubles as a place where Nancy is exiled from the security she had experienced prior to Martin's arrival.

That Nancy is physically hemmed in by Martin's closeness is owing to the deliberate will of her mistress. Sapphira orders her to sleep on a pallet outside her own room, thus leaving her exposed in the hall at night. This burden echoes the experience of Jacobs's great-aunt, also called Nancy, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs records how her great-aunt was deprived of children of her own because she had to sleep in her mistress's draughty hallway, in case her mistress or her children needed her:

So my aunt was compelled to lie at her door, until one midnight she was forced to leave, to give premature birth to a child. In a fortnight she was forced to resume her place on the entry floor, because Mrs Flint's babe needed attention. She kept her station there through summer and winter, until she had given premature birth to six children [...] Finally, toiling all day, and being deprived of rest at night, completely broke down her constitution.⁵¹²

Sapphira employs the tradition with more sinister purpose, to facilitate the kind of sexual assault on female slaves that is much deployed in fiction about slavery.⁵¹³ Cather's Nancy is momentarily caught by Martin—'as she

⁵¹⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p. 216. Suicide is presented as a strategy of resistance in other retrospective novels. Clara kills herself rather sooner than enter into a sexual relationship with her master's son in J. California Cooper's *Family* and Alice eventually commits suicide after giving birth to two of her master's children in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

⁵¹¹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.217.

⁵¹² Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.113.

⁵¹³ Lalita Tademy's best-selling novel *Cane River* (2001) also offers a fictional treatment of a female slave's powerlessness when faced with white male aggression. Fourteen-year-old Suzette is raped by her mistress's nephew, Eugene Daurat. The narrator records how as he moved 'back and forth' the slave girl 'froze in the inescapable certainty of the moment'. The rape is symbolised by her clothing, as 'even in the dull moonlight she could see that her beautiful white dress was streaked with traces of scarlet'. Here, the slave experiences all

was going towards the door, with the long bolster upright in her arms, Martin caught her round the shoulders and kissed her on the mouth’—and her fear at her powerlessness is recorded with the words ‘though the candlelight was dim, he saw she was really frightened’, highlighting her vulnerability to sexual assault.⁵¹⁴ The place Nancy had previously thought of as home becomes a place marked by claustrophobia because she is subject to being physically trapped within Martin’s arms.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl stops short of recording the actual rape of the slave girl in question, but that Nancy is confined by her mistress’s will and the young master’s desire is neatly depicted in the incident in which Martin traps her in the cherry tree. A deeply claustrophobic atmosphere is conjured by Nancy’s predicament when Martin approaches her on an occasion when she has climbed aloft to pick cherries from a tree. Nancy seeks out the solitude of the tree because she wishes to run away from the threat lurking in her home. She is described as ‘playing truant’ that morning. The scene opens as a pastoral. Her father helps her use his chair to reach a cherry branch and she sits perched in the tree with her bare feet and legs in the sunshine, in a child-like pose. She feels light-hearted and protected in the tree, ‘nothing but the foolish, dreamy, nigger side of her nature climbed the tree with her,’ but the seeming innocence of this scene, belied by the racially inflected description of her emotional state, is further undercut by a reminder that she is not free. Martin’s reaction is full of menace. Nancy does not believe he will follow her out but Bluebell has told him where she is. He sings the ‘old darky song’ about the ‘yaller gal’ and tells Bluebell: ‘There never was a finer morning for picking cherries or anything else,’ and his intentions are made clear.⁵¹⁵ There is no doubt that he is planning a sexual assault on the girl and that his inference about the

that Nancy fears because not only is she subject to the assault but she is blamed for the outcome. Her mistress shows her displeasure at Suzette’s pregnancy by invoking the stereotype of the jezebel, declaring, ‘you people cannot help yourselves, I suppose,’ and Suzette’s honest riposte of ‘what could anyone have done?’ does little to appease her mistress. Lalita Tademy, *Cane River* (New York: Warner, 2001), pp.43-53.

⁵¹⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.166.

⁵¹⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.177-9.

cherries is not solely wordplay. Nancy resembles Gothic heroines who are pursued by unscrupulous villains in the classics of Gothic fiction.⁵¹⁶

Another unsettling aspect about this incident, however, is that it is recorded with such playfulness of tone. Nancy is rendered partly complicit because she seems to flirt a little with Martin. This complicity is demonstrated when Nancy lets her guard down for an instant, thinking he only means to tease her and drops some cherries down to him. The novel records that ‘she didn’t move, but she laughed a soft darky laugh,’ making her response racially inflected. This racial inflection seems to endorse a situation whereby Nancy is trapped by the physical constraints of the space she occupies but also by the socially sanctioned attitude that this white man has towards a black girl. The description of his assault on her underscores the precariousness of her position, as ‘the instant her head was turned Martin stepped lightly on the chair, caught her bare ankles, and drew her two legs about his cheeks like a frame,’ and she fearfully recognises that ‘everything had changed in a flash.’⁵¹⁷ She is rendered powerless by the literal hold Martin has on her person but also, tacitly, by acting on the ‘foolish, dreamy, nigger side of her nature.’ Nancy screams for her pappy and another layer of powerlessness is revealed. Old Jeff and Sampson see the wet boot marks on the seat but cannot do anything about Martin’s transgression. Martin then plans his assault on Nancy more carefully by pretending the cherry tree incident has not taken place. The narrative reveals that ‘he knew she must be pursued carelessly and taken at the right moment, off her guard,’ highlighting that Nancy is never at liberty.⁵¹⁸

Nancy is, then, both powerless and trapped within this plantation home. She laments, ‘I caint do nothing!’, and so Rachel Blake agrees to help her escape from the house’s confines, promising ‘I’m going to get you away from all this, Nancy.’ Rachel explains to her father her worst suspicions about Sapphira’s complicity in Martin’s seduction, saying that ‘she knows

⁵¹⁶ Examples of heroines in classic Gothic fiction who are trapped by sexual predators include Isabella in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Emily in Ann Radcliff’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Antonia in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796).

⁵¹⁷ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.179-80.

⁵¹⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.178; p.182.

Nancy lays unprotected out in the open hall every night, where he can sneak down to her,' underlining how being trapped in the house is central to Nancy's difficulties.⁵¹⁹ Indeed, the only way Nancy can be free is to endure a kind of katabasis, stowed with Rachel under blankets in Whitfield's coffin-wagon. Yet, just like Dessa, who emerges reborn in the mistress's bed, Nancy does survive this ordeal to create herself anew in Canada. This renewal complicates the idea of both mistress and slave being confined within the plantation home, because the slave experiences her exile as freedom. When Nancy returns at the end of the novel she is an accomplished housekeeper, who by living in Canada has moved further from Back Creek than her mistress has ever travelled. Nancy has experienced renewed opportunities and a broader perspective on life because she has moved beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation home.

Nancy's mistress Sapphira, whilst never being a slave, is never fully free either. Not only is she portrayed in a self-imposed exile, as I considered earlier, but near the beginning of the events in the novel the elderly Sapphira is described as someone who is physically constrained by having 'to sit in a chair all day.'⁵²⁰ Sapphira's world is circumscribed by the boundaries of her plantation and infrequent visits to her daughters in nearby towns. Her world is also confined by her limited outlook. Rosowski describes Sapphira's perspective as defined by 'unsettling contradictions', referring to her role as Southern matriarch, but I would extend these contradictions to include her position as simultaneously in control of her surroundings and controlled by her circumstances.⁵²¹ This contradiction is demonstrated keenly when she struggles to her feet to eavesdrop upon the incriminating conversation in which Bluebell teases Nancy about her undue attentions to the master. This contradiction highlights the limits of Sapphira's range of interests to her immediate intimates and surroundings, but it also reveals the limits of her perceived reach and influence. Significantly, it is 'that very night' when Nancy is ordered 'to sleep on the

⁵¹⁹ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.216; p.217; p.226.

⁵²⁰ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.54.

⁵²¹ Rosowski, p.234.

floor outside Mrs Colbert's bedroom door.'⁵²² Yet even this response to the mistress's perceived exigency does not allow her to regain control: on the night of Old Jezebel's funeral Sapphira is reminded that she is trapped when she cannot reach the candles or a drink.⁵²³ It is a combination of Sapphira's physical constraints and her emotional concerns that make her experience claustrophobia. More so, she feels debilitated because she cannot be sure the girl outside her door is Nancy and not a 'substitute.' She calls to her and when Nancy is startled out of her sleep and answers, Sapphira concedes that 'it was over. Her shattered, treacherous house stood safe about her again.'⁵²⁴ This safety is illusory because it depends upon the mistress's displacement within the place that she considers home: Sapphira retires increasingly to the confines of her room. It is the white mistress who is left most subject to claustrophobia in this novel. This factor serves to question the notion that the white mistress's life was characterised only by privilege on the plantation.

At the beginning of *Dessa Rose* the mistress also feels trapped by her surroundings. Ruth experiences claustrophobia as a kind of self-imposed exile, because she is confined to her isolated plantation home away from her beloved Charleston. Her experience of Sutton Glen 'was like being swallowed up by the forest, she thought.' She experiences a kind of exile, because not only is she separated from her family and friends as a result of their disenchantment with Bertie and his gambling, but she is also alienated from her neighbours. Indeed, Ruth sees harbouring the escaped slaves as a way of taking revenge on her neighbours for their hostility towards her, viewing this act of defiance as 'a slightly malicious means of evening the score in their continuing estrangement in the neighbourhood.'⁵²⁵ Yet this desire to thwart her neighbours through failing to restore the status quo by reporting

⁵²² Cather, *Sapphira*, p.61.

⁵²³ The theme of being physically trapped is common in both classic and later Gothic fiction. Examples include the unnamed narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1843), the unnamed narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), Agnes in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

⁵²⁴ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.106; p.107.

⁵²⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.113; p.140.

the fugitives at least suggests tacit authority. So that whilst Ruth does experience a kind of claustrophobia, it is more concerned with her perceived situation than being literally trapped; this position is reserved for the slave in the story.

Dessa's prison is a literal, punitive space, not a metaphorical imprisonment such as that occupied by the white mistress: the root cellar in which she is confined after rebelling on the coffle is a place where 'chains rasped.' The space is stifling, as seen through the white writer Nehemiah's perspective as he is 'closeted' with her in the root cellar.⁵²⁶ This is noteworthy because Nehemiah chooses to be there and this emphasises Dessa's literal imprisonment as no choice falls to her.⁵²⁷ Mitchell sees Dessa's prison as 'arguably a tropological reversal of Jacobs's "loophole of retreat," the garret.'⁵²⁸ Yet Dessa's prison here is not self-imposed and it is not a safe retreat; she has been placed here deliberately against her will. Nathan informs Ruth of Dessa's experience in the sweat-box, for example, of how she 'screeched like a stuck-pig' and was 'yelling like a banshee.' This is compelling because it insists upon the physical dimension of the slave's actual imprisonment over and above any claustrophobia that may be associated with any of the white characters. Furthermore, the novel's revelations of Dessa's incarceration assert the slave's ability to recognise the wider implications of her circumstances. Dessa reflects that 'laying up there in [her] own foulment made [her] know how low [she] was. And [she] cried, [she] was like an animal; whipped like one; in the dirt like one. [She] hadn't never known peoples could do peoples like this.'⁵²⁹ Dessa's experience of being literally trapped through imprisonment, compounded by her feeling of being effectively trapped in Ruth's white bed, lead her to a fuller understanding both of oppression and of what freedom means. Ultimately,

⁵²⁶ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.14; p.23.

⁵²⁷ Imprisonment of slaves is a feature of retrospective fiction about slavery. Examples include Alice in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Velma in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and Mintah in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997).

⁵²⁸ Mitchell, p.71.

⁵²⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.142; p.191.

Dessa escapes from both kinds of confinements in the novel and in doing so she confronts and transcends imprisonment.

Ruth, too, confronts and overcomes her experience of claustrophobia in the novel. Initially, Ruth is in a kind of exile as she is trapped by Bertie's unrealistic promises and her own limited expectations. *Dessa Rose* shows the erstwhile white mistress's initial reliance on former slaves. One example of this is provided by the stove that Ruth is unable to operate and only Ada can manage.⁵³⁰ But after Ruth has been abandoned by her husband and Mammy dies, she has to rely on different resources. In the slave-selling scheme she perpetrates and in her extra-marital affair with Nathan, Ruth breaks free from her own personal claustrophobia, eventually to take her new found independent wealth and more open-minded perspective out East. This is not the case, however, with many other fictional white mistresses, who remain trapped within the institution of slave-ownership.⁵³¹

Manon is another mistress who feels trapped by circumstance and she chooses to take refuge in opiates. Manon feels cut off from her neighbours and must go to her husband for 'reports from the outside world', whilst she feels confined in the relentless tedium of her life.⁵³² I am persuaded by Susan V. Donaldson who describes Manon's narrative as 'haunted from beginning to end by a sense of entrapment and foreboding,' because there is much evidence that the mistress feels powerless and alienated in this

⁵³⁰ The concept of white women having to rely on black women for domestic labour is the focus of Kathryn Stockett's best-selling *The Help* (2009). This novel, which uses the marketing strap-line of 'the other side of *Gone with the Wind*', is not, however, expressly about antebellum slavery. It explores the lives of several maids in Mississippi in the 1960s and their relationship with their white employers. The book exposes the endemic racism of domestic servitude much to the chagrin of the white townswomen.

⁵³¹ Margaret Weylin in *Kindred* (1979) is more typical than Ruth. She is demonised in the novel, portrayed as a petty tyrant who fails to live up to her society's expectations, yet in many ways Margaret too is trapped by circumstance and her position in the slavocracy. The slave Dana opines that 'Weylin had married a poor, uneducated, nervous, startlingly pretty young woman, who was determined to be the kind of person she thought of as a lady' (p.98). In her case this means that she will not do any work in the plantation home that she considers menial. Instead, she attempts to take on the prescribed role of mistress of the house, embroiling herself within the claustrophobia by embracing her perception of what it means to be a white mistress. Far from exerting any meaningful control over the household, Margaret interferes and complains needlessly. Dana's conclusion is that 'Margaret in her boredom simply rushed around and made a nuisance of herself' (p.94).

⁵³² Martin, *Property*, p.55.

environment.⁵³³ On one occasion, for example, Manon claims it is as if she were living in 'a foreign country, a land where madness was the rule' and that only her 'understanding' is sufficient to sense the claustrophobia that at best masquerades as freedom. Yet, partly owing to the impairment that Manon's opium habit may have on her perception, and partly because of her own solipsism, Manon's sense of claustrophobia is best seen not in the 'understanding' she believes she possesses, but in her relation to her slave Sarah. At the outset Sarah's actions and situation are decided by her mistress. Manon simply records, 'It was so hot I had her fan me. So there we sat.'⁵³⁴ Even on the night of the insurrection Sarah is confined in the room with her mistress. Manon is sluggish from taking her tincture, but Sarah has planned ahead and is ready to free herself when the rebels arrive, leaving her mistress to face imprisonment alone.

When she makes her escape, frantically struggling with Manon to take possession of the horse and ride away with her baby, she literally frees herself from the grasp of her mistress.⁵³⁵ Whilst Sarah, like Nancy and Dessa and the other female slaves in retrospective fiction about slavery, is inarguably more confined than her mistress, she becomes, like the others, free. Before she is recaptured owing to Manon's tenacity, Sarah's travels as a fugitive see her imitate a white man and later be accepted in the North as a free woman. In Manon's mind Sarah's freedom is contrasted with her own position of remaining trapped: 'I imagined Sarah, dressed in some borrowed finery, her hair pulled up in a good bonnet, her elbows propped on the rail of a ship, while water churned below her and the miles between her and the world she knew slipped away.' Manon's envy of her slave's freedom can be discerned from the wistfulness of her words here, and when Manon's uncle informs her that Sarah has lived as a free person and that this 'experience is generally deleterious to a negro's character,' Manon's response is astute, if

⁵³³ Susan V. Donaldson, 'Telling Forgotten Tales of Slavery in the Postmodern South', *Southern Literary Journal*, 40 (2008), 267-85 (p.275).

⁵³⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.132; p.7.

⁵³⁵ Other retrospective novels about slavery deploy escape narratives, including the story of Raven Quickskill, who escapes from Arthur Swille in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Rutherford Calhoun who stows away on the ship *Republic* in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990).

acerbic. She is able to inform her aunt that Sarah has ‘done more than that’ because, as she explains, ‘she has tasted a freedom you and I will never know [...] she has travelled about the country as a free white man.’⁵³⁶ Manon acknowledges that the only real freedom in antebellum Southern society is accorded to white men and this means that Sarah has experienced something that is indeed beyond the ken of herself and her aunt. That Sarah has experienced freedom to this extent simply exacerbates both Manon’s sense of her own entrapment and her vengeful insistence on keeping Sarah by her side. Here, Manon continues to impose bondage on her slave but she also continues to feel the force of the societal limitations under which she herself exists.

Indeed, in this novel a full recognition of how it is the mistress who remains in the claustrophobic location of the slave-plantation is made explicit. In this context, *Property* serves more fully to confront the role of the white woman who suffers because of her prejudices than any of the earlier fictions about slavery. Manon’s own sense of claustrophobia is presented early in the novel, through her dream. She records, ‘I was dreaming. There was a fox. As I approached the animal it opened its mouth as if panting and a high-pitched scream came out. I woke up inside that scream.’⁵³⁷ The screech turns out to belong to an owl, but her reaction to the unsettling noise underscores Manon’s sense of doom and her feelings of claustrophobia as well as the pervading menace that may be commensurate with the hauntedness, the feelings of entrapment, which Donaldson identifies.⁵³⁸

Put simply, Manon feels that she is trapped within the slave system; for example, after Joel Borden’s embarrassing visit, during which he comes face to face with Walter, Manon admits that Joel can now tell tales of how her husband strikes the servants and lets his bastard son run around like a wild creature. She notes that it should ‘paint an edifying picture’ of the

⁵³⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.157; p.205.

⁵³⁷ Martin, *Property*, p.14.

⁵³⁸ This ‘hauntedness’ is reminiscent of Gothic literature’s ability to ‘rematerialise the ghosts of America’s history,’ enabling the novel to ‘haunt back,’ according to Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.198.

‘choice’ she has made.⁵³⁹ Manon’s prejudice is evident here, but *Property* also posits another reason for this white mistress’s feelings of confinement by raising the question of how much choice a girl of limited financial means might have. Manon is presented as a pretty but poor girl who is trapped by her marriage options. Oates notes that, ‘though Manon is vividly individualised, we understand that her experiences as daughter, naive young bride, despoiled and disillusioned wife are representative of her social position.’ Oates describes her marriage night as a ‘Sadean scene’, and Gaudet is figured as a sexual sadist in this encounter as well as in his odious games with the slave boys that open the narrative.⁵⁴⁰ Manon feels trapped in her marital duties, revealing how she is ‘nearly blind with resentment and could only get through the ordeal of [their] conjugal encounters by recourse to a steadily waning sense of duty,’ and of how she could not conceal her ‘revulsion’ and ‘frustration’ on these occasions.⁵⁴¹

Yet Manon is not presented simply as an innocent victim of the slave system. She thinks of herself as a martyr but she is obsessed with her own condition. She shows no concern for the fears of her husband or servants as the insurrection approaches, instead recording how she pieces the stories of the evening together to ‘keep [her] mind off [her] own suffering, which was intense.’ Even before the rebellion Manon feels trapped: for instance, when she has to leave her mother’s house in the city and return home to Gaudet she is full of regret, declaring that she ‘felt like a prisoner who has been led from his dark cell into the daylight, shown a gay, lively, sunny world, and told, all this is yours, and whenever you can persuade your jailer to accompany you, you may see it again.’ She notes that, ‘the sight of him was like a door slamming in my face.’⁵⁴² Tellingly, the language she uses to describe her claustrophobia reveals her own selfishness in its deliberate concentration on her sphere. This is exemplified in the words she uses to express her fear: ‘He’s going to sell *my* house, *I* thought, and *I* will be trapped here until *I* die,’ and, ‘*my* little circuit, *I* thought, from hope to fear

⁵³⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.32.

⁵⁴⁰ Oates, pp.135-6.

⁵⁴¹ Martin, *Property*, p.60.

⁵⁴² Martin, *Property*, p.133; p.99; p.105.

and back again.’⁵⁴³ Manon uses the language of victimhood but it is clear that she is as much subject to her own nature as to the institution of slavery to which she continues to subscribe.

That Manon remains a slave mistress after she has sold the slaves on the Gaudet Plantation and refused an offer for Sarah is owing to her own deliberate choice. Certainly she is a victim of circumstances: her husband has left no money, only debts, and she is consequently too poor to secure a new husband. Manon realises she cannot marry Joel because of a discrepancy between ‘his requirements’ and her ‘resources.’ She notes: ‘It seemed that happiness must always be just beyond me and I should always stand gazing in at it as through a shop window where everything glittered and appealed to me, but I had not enough money to enter.’ Yet she rejects Monsieur Roget’s generous offer of payment for Sarah, and she is not forced to retain ownership of her slave. It is Manon’s bitterness that forces her to insist that Sarah share her new exile in the city. Manon is able to reflect on her false laughter with Joel and to realise ‘when he looked into [her] eyes, it must have been like staring through the windows of a burnt out house,’ but she is not able to discern that she is largely responsible for her own unhappiness, and that is not only her marriage that has left her with ‘ashes for a heart,’ but her own choices.⁵⁴⁴

It is perhaps surprising that on balance the plantation is presented as a source of claustrophobia for the mistress more than the slave. Certainly the slave women experience physical and psychological imprisonment; this is seen specifically in Martin’s foiled assault on Nancy, Dessa’s incarceration in the root cellar and the abuse that Sarah suffers as well as the relentless pursuit of the slave catchers, yet arguably the mistress is the one who is most subject to ending up trapped in the novels. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira chooses her place of exile but she is forced to remain there by her debilitating illness; in *Dessa Rose*, Ruth chooses to accompany her husband to Sutton Glen and in *Property*, even after abandoning the Gaudet

⁵⁴³ Martin, *Property*, p.113; emphasis added.

⁵⁴⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.161; p.166.

Plantation, Manon remains at least figuratively trapped in her role as slave mistress in her new abode in New Orleans. Yet in all three of the novels the slave women effect an escape: Nancy builds a new, more prosperous life in Canada; Dessa escapes her prison and her poverty and sets up a new home with Harker, the man of her choice, and Sarah experiences the ultimate freedom (albeit temporary) of travelling as a white man. And so, it is the white mistress for whom the plantation forms a microcosm of displacement because she feels trapped within a system from which she cannot fully be extricated.

Voyeurism: The Plantation as a Place of Scrutiny and Scopophilia

The claustrophobia associated with the plantation setting in fiction about slavery is also compounded by relentless voyeurism: mistresses and slave women, sharing close quarters with one another, live in a perpetual state of watchfulness. In this section I explore how the mistress is scrutinised. I expose the effects of this perception on the self-image of Sapphira, Ruth and Manon, who are often presented seated in front of a mirror. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* the mistress loses confidence in her own self-image when she compares herself to her young slave girl; in *Dessa Rose* the mistress wants to be viewed as someone who fulfils the role of mistress, but who finds her function questioned by the new freedoms that coincide with the arrival of the former rebels on the Sutton Plantation; and in *Property* the mistress resents that she is watched by her husband, and imagines herself to be diminished by being compared physically to her slave. I also consider the effects on Nancy, Dessa and Sarah of being subject to the gaze of others on the slave women. Nancy's condition is affected by the opinions of others including Bluebell and Martin as well as her mistress; Dessa is closely watched and judged; and Sarah's actions are followed by Gaudet. I argue that in many novels about slavery the mistress is portrayed as a key perpetrator of voyeurism in the antebellum plantation, and that her scopophilia is in fact central to voyeurism within her home.

The mirror as a site of voyeurism is much discussed as a common trope in literature. Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of classic fairytales associates the mirror with 'narcissism;' Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss 'mirror madness,' whereby female characters become absorbed with their own image and can become consumed with self-loathing or anxiety; and Marina Warner considers the mirror as a potent mythological icon, 'with its powers of reflection and self-reflection.'⁵⁴⁵ A fictional scene of a woman seated at her mirror evokes an immediate association with self-image and invites questions about the degree of the character's self-perception. The institution of slavery complicates this trope in the case of the white mistress because, as I argue, the mistress is often attended at her looking glass by her slave and the possibility of projection also intrudes upon the scene.

This aspect of projection is certainly so in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, when Rachel disturbs her mother at her dressing hour whilst she is being attended by Nancy, who is dressing her hair. This is also the occasion on which she overhears Nancy being slapped. Sapphira is seated 'before a gilt mirror,' and 'for all Mrs Blake could see, her mother's grey and chestnut hair was in perfect order.' It is significant that Rachel can detect no reason for her mother's dissatisfaction with Nancy's hairdressing, because it suggests that Sapphira is disgruntled by her own image and it is her fading looks that have caused her to take out her anger on her slave. Also significant is that Rachel moves her mother's wheel-chair to face her, 'so that her mother sat in the sunlight and faced the East windows instead of the looking glass,' because it implies that Rachel has at least tacitly inferred that it is Sapphira's own reflection in the mirror that displeases her.⁵⁴⁶ Drawing on Bettelheim's connection between the mirror and female narcissism, Lisa Marcus deals thoughtfully with this scene, comparing Sapphira to the stepmother in *Snow White*, who realises her pseudo-

⁵⁴⁵ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp.202-3; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Second Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.34-36; Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scarring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 1998), p.14.

⁵⁴⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.13-14.

daughter is fairer than she is. For Marcus, this comparison is what causes her to slap Nancy; she 'enviously projects herself into the sexually vital body of her slave.' Marcus continues that this realisation serves to undercut the mistress's sense of self.⁵⁴⁷

I agree that Sapphira's involuntary comparison of herself with her slave women undermines her confidence and that it can only be re-built by the mistress reassuring herself of her authority; however, I extend Marcus's consideration to incorporate Till's role. This consideration applies because Sapphira is reassured by her slave Till's ministrations on the night of Old Jezebel's funeral, the occasion on which she feels most insecure. This is witnessed when Till comes to comfort her mistress and takes up the position of servant in front of the mirror where she 'stood brushing out her heavy hair.'⁵⁴⁸ That Sapphira is comforted by Till, fulfilling her maternal role, but made to feel vulnerable by Nancy's reflection in her mirror illustrates the complicated power dynamics of slavery because here the mistress is unthreatened by middle-aged Till, but responds to the power inherent in her slave girl's nubility, just as the mirror confirms her own physical decline.

However, Sapphira's voyeurism transcends simply catching a glimpse of her slave women as they are reflected in her mirror: it is much more deliberate. Marcus describes Sapphira's role as 'engaging in numerous acts of surveillance that allow her invisibly to mastermind the plantation slavocracy,' thus ensuring 'that those who serve her remain visible under her ever watchful gaze.'⁵⁴⁹ Of course this constant vigilance serves not only to victimise the slave here but also to exacerbate the mistress's self-absorption. Pivotaly, watching Nancy makes Sapphira more obsessed by her own failings. It also contributes to Sapphira's chosen course of action. I am persuaded by Marcus when she posits that 'the imaginative possession of Nancy's body that Sapphira achieves, if only for a moment, in the mirror

⁵⁴⁷ Lisa Marcus, "'The Pull of Race and Blood and Kindred': Willa Cather's Southern Inheritance', in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed. by Ann Romines (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp.98-119 (p.112).

⁵⁴⁸ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.104.

⁵⁴⁹ Marcus, p.109.

scene is actualised later in the novel, when Sapphira projects her desire through a surrogate seducer.⁵⁵⁰ This develops the sense that watching her slaves becomes a form of scopophilia on the part of the mistress.⁵⁵¹ It also extends the use of the mirror trope as a medium for examining self-reflection; by taking stock of her own position in relation to the master and the slave, the mistress is able to orchestrate strategies to restore her self-perceived potency.

Nancy is the obvious victim of her mistress's scopophilia, but Nancy's youth and vitality subject her to more than her mistress's suspicion: this and her lighter skin colour also contribute to the jealousy of some of the other house slaves. But it is not so much other slaves or even the men on the plantation who are seen as the most frequent perpetrators of voyeurism; this role is reserved for the white mistress. That she is watched and discussed by the others troubles Nancy and she is aware that Bluebell is sent to spy on her, for example, by the cook Fat Lizzie. Nevertheless it remains the case that an encounter she has with one of the other slave women is overheard by the mistress and this is what contributes to the sense of voyeurism in the novel, because Sapphira's eavesdropping is what first fosters her suspicion of Nancy. Old Washington is the only 'close-mouthed' witness to the 'unfortunate incident' that had changed the mistress's reaction to Nancy. She overhears Fat Lizzie teasing Nancy about her fondness for the master and the mill: 'you're sure runnin' de mill room wid a high han', Miss Yaller Gal, an' yo'se always down yonder when yo'se wanted.' Nancy does not see her mistress 'standing in the doorway,' but that she is observed is partly what constitutes Nancy's persecution.⁵⁵² Later, also, Martin engages in gossip with Bluebell and capitalises on her distrust and jealousy of Nancy to win himself an ally.⁵⁵³ It is Nancy's youth and relative beauty that cause her to be the subject of voyeurism in the way that

⁵⁵⁰ Marcus, p.112.

⁵⁵¹ For more on the underlying sexual dynamic between mistresses and slaves see Michael Bibler, *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation 1936-1968* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp.123-128; pp.150-4.

⁵⁵² Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.59-61.

⁵⁵³ Cather, *Sapphira*, pp.184-5.

young women are the subject of a predatory gaze in Gothic fiction, but in the case of retrospective fiction about slavery the female slave in particular is subject to more than just male voyeurism; she is also the object of her white mistress's scrutiny.⁵⁵⁴

Voyeurism in the novel continues beyond Nancy's sojourn at the Mill Farm to encompass the portrayal of Nancy's return, and Sapphira's scopophilia appropriates the child Cather in the novel. The final chapter of the novel inserts the five-year-old child as another observer, recording that 'the actual scene of the meeting had been arranged for [her] benefit.' She recalls that she and Till planned to stay upstairs and the old housekeeper reassures the child with the words 'Nancy'll come up and you'll see her as soon as I do.'⁵⁵⁵ Of course, this means that the first glimpse of Nancy by her mother in over twenty years must be shared by the child representative of the white mistress, her great-grandmother. And yet, voyeurism has limited power for the mistress. Something is kept from the child, too. She records that, 'Nancy and Till sat where they were, hand in hand, and went on talking as if I were not there at all,' and the narrative reveals that there is a 'spell' in Nancy's talk that the child Willa learns not to break by interrupting.⁵⁵⁶ Here, too, the white mistress's role becomes a complex combination of complicity and vulnerability; she at once perpetuates the victimisation of the slave by making her a subject of voyeurism, and herself remains a victim of the narcissism fostered by her position as mistress. The child narrator is necessarily outside the circle of Nancy and Till's communication because she is not their blood relation and the difference in their experiences are necessarily racially inflected. They cannot share the experience in the same way and she is relegated to the position of observer, again confirming the white mistress as a voyeur.

In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth also capitalises on her racially defined position as a white mistress. Aspects of the mistress's self-image are interrogated in

⁵⁵⁴ Examples of female victims of the predatory male gaze in retrospective fiction about slavery include Dana in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sally in Barbara Chase Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979) and Ginnie in Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995).

⁵⁵⁵ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.282.

⁵⁵⁶ Cather, *Sapphira*, p.285; p.288.

a mirror scene which again also includes a female slave. Just after Mammy dies Ruth rehearses Annabelle in the role of lady's maid. She attempts to use the girl as a kind of substitute for her mammy by prattling to her about fashions and hairstyles. The novel records that, 'once, Rufel had stood posing in front of a mirror, lifting her hair from her neck, tugging at the waist and bodice of her dress.' Annabelle, instead of responding with admiration to her mistress's self-satisfied posturing, walks away, leaving her to it. Ruth records how she 'happened to look up in mid-sentence' to see 'reflected in the mirror, the dusky doorway [that] seemed to yawn at [her] back, and she turned, suddenly furious,' as she follows Annabelle's retreating form in the mirror. That the fugitive walks away from her chore is relevant to an understanding of the power dynamic between Ruth and the former slaves on the Sutton Plantation, but that the incident is recorded in the mirror resonates with Ruth's receding power as well as one of the earliest moments of clarity, in which she catches a glimpse of her changed status. Ruth admonishes Annabelle for her impertinence and ingratitude, but 'hands on hips, Annabelle leaned toward Rufel, grinning in her face; the dark shoots of her tangled hair seeming to writhe in the yellow light from the fan glass over the door. A thousand imps seemed to dance in her eyes as she said on a rising note of incredulity, "Mistress 'Fel? Miz Rufel?"'⁵⁵⁷ The tangible Gothic imagery here presents the slave as a kind of demonic *doppelganger*, casting a malevolent shadow over the mistress whilst simultaneously feigning ignorance of any infraction. This incident records a transgression of boundaries which Donna Heiland identifies as characteristic of the Gothic's transgression of 'the boundaries of one's own identity.'⁵⁵⁸ Ruth's sense of self is dependent on her slave's subjugation and ideally even her admiration. The hierarchy of female power is complicated in the plantation home because the mirror captures the look from both sides: the slave watching her mistress and the mistress watching the slave.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.99-100.

⁵⁵⁸ Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.3.

⁵⁵⁹ Other retrospective plantation fiction takes up this concern of the mistress and the slave as putative rivals by using the trope of the mirror. For example, Alice Randall inserts a mirror scene near the beginning of *The Wind Done Gone* in which the slave Cynara, framed in the novel as the half-sister of Scarlett O'Hara, sits at a mirror pondering on how she

If Ruth is under observation in *Dessa Rose* then Dessa is obsessively scrutinised. The first interaction between Dessa and Ruth begins with ‘Dessa watched the white woman.’ The watching is mutual initially; their next interaction begins with ‘Rufel watch[ing] the coloured girl’ and she gets out of her rocking chair on occasions ‘to fetch some article, to stretch, or just to look more closely at the coloured girl.’⁵⁶⁰ Ruth’s sense of self is predicated upon her own ideas of what a white mistress should be, but it is also partly determined by her observations of the slave women and the distance she assigns between them.

This counterpointing is displayed most clearly in Ruth’s response to Dessa’s crimes and, more specifically, in her reaction to seeing the evidence of the punishment inflicted upon Dessa with her own eyes. Nathan tells Ruth about Dessa’s punishment and the scars, but she is reluctant to believe because it undermines her own cherished notions of white decency and black degeneracy: she cannot easily cope with evidence that suggests the contrary. Ruth demands that she be acquainted with the truth, and Nathan reveals that ‘they lashed her about the hips and legs, branded her along the insides of her thighs.’ Ruth replies, ‘that couldn’t be true, it was too, too awful.’ Yet she is intrigued, ‘interested despite herself’, and wonders how he comes to know, asking ‘How you come to see all this?’ Nathan tells Ruth how he had been sent with his master who intended to buy the woman who was ‘breeding already’ after she had been released from the sweat box. She had been injured ‘just from the waist down’, he explains, ‘cause they didn’t want to ‘impair her value.’⁵⁶¹ It is noteworthy that part of Ruth’s consternation comes from the fact that Nathan has seen what she has not witnessed first-hand. For Ruth, it is her looking that confers judgement because this privilege of deciding what is truth belongs to white people only

misses her mother, Mammy of *Gone with the Wind*. She makes a direct comparison between herself and Scarlett, whom she refers to as ‘Other’. She says, ‘I wish I was Other, the girl whose sausage curls I’ve seen Mammy comb [...] I wish not to be out of the picture.’ It is significant that being in the picture, in other words being seen, is a goal of the slave woman; later she declares, ‘I wish Mammy loved me and Other saw it,’ suggesting also that the desire to be watched is not limited to wishing for her own mother’s loving gaze, but is here directly related to the comparison between mistress and slave (p.5; p.145).

⁵⁶⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.88; pp.90-91.

⁵⁶¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.134-5.

in her cultural context, and in her estimation she has the power to declare that only what she believes, based on what she has witnessed, is the truth.

Ruth's initial response is to filter her reaction through her preconceptions about black and white women; she says, 'what a horrid story!' and proceeds to blame the trader for being 'vicious,' but she does not extend blame to her counterpart, Dessa's mistress on the Vaughan plantation. Ruth thinks the violation is 'all the more horrible' because the intention was not to kill the girl, but she still refuses to take the story on trust, telling herself 'that's if it happened.' Ruth challenges Nathan with her interim judgement when she says provocatively that 'she must have done something pretty bad,' as she was 'unable herself to imagine such a crime.' Ruth falls back on prejudices about black female sexuality to seek to understand what has happened, declaring, 'I bet she was making up to the master; that's why the mistress was so cruel. I bet that's what it was.'⁵⁶² She takes refuge in her preconceptions because she has no other visual evidence to corroborate such an unsettling account. *Dessa Rose* proceeds to underscore the superior value accorded to a mistress's version of events, even if they are untrue, over a slave's account, even if it has veracity. When Nathan goes on to explain that Dessa was carrying a Negro baby at the time, Ruth is 'moved in spite of herself.' Yet she still doubts the story because it does not fit with her established view of the world and the relations between the races, insisting, 'well, I know it must've been something happen to cause all that.' In her continued suspicions, Ruth enacts what she perceives as the role of the white mistress. Ruth's initial reaction echoes Miss Emmaline's earlier response to Dessa, by mistrusting the words of a black woman over what she herself is able to perceive. This attitude compounds Ruth's ability to see only what she believes to be true as well as the slave woman's lack of credibility as a witness.⁵⁶³

Ruth's displacement of blame from white Emmaline to the black slaves is commensurate with the way in which she refuses to believe Ada's

⁵⁶² Williams, *Dessa Rose*, pp.135-7.

⁵⁶³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.137; p.41.

claim that the girl is eighteen years old. She dismisses Ada's tale of a lecherous master who had then turned his attentions to her daughter Annabelle. 'Rufel didn't believe a word of that,' because she could see 'nothing attractive' in either Ada or Annabelle. This reveals her ignorance as well as a streak of callousness, but what is also confirmed is the 'indignation' with which she greets Ada's story. To Mammy, Ruth insists that Ada's story is untrue because 'No white man would do that.' Mammy says that men can do things 'a lady can't even guess at,' refusing to allow the white woman to displace all of the blame onto black women.⁵⁶⁴ Yet Ruth refuses to give credence to what happened to Ada and her daughter, believing that 'both of them probably run off by the mistress for making up to the master.' Ruth connects her own feelings 'lest she be trapped in grief and fear,' with Ada's situation, concluding that the story about a cruel master was just calculated to 'play on her sympathy.'⁵⁶⁵ Ruth is portrayed as unenlightened here, not yet ready to see the truth in Jacobs's claim, for example, that 'cruelty is contagious in uncivilised communities.'⁵⁶⁶ Here, Mammy's corrections rely on clear-sightedness, but this is something that Ruth lacks owing to her narcissism which persists until she learns perspicacity from her experiences alongside the fugitives.

Ruth has to learn to trust Dessa to divulge her own truth. This learning process is central to the project of retrospective fiction because the characters model the slow process of enlightenment that is only allowed by the advantage of hindsight. That Williams endows her characters with increased understanding can be directly associated with the writer's post-civil-rights era perspective. Although Ruth may be able to dismiss Ada and Annabelle, she continues to demand access to the truth about Dessa. Nevertheless, she is horrified by the 'image of herself inspecting the wench's naked loins,' even though she thinks this may be the only way to find 'proof', to 'get to the bottom of it.'⁵⁶⁷ Despite her feelings of revulsion, Ruth still needs to see to believe. After her conversation with Nathan, she goes straight

⁵⁶⁴ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.91.

⁵⁶⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.93.

⁵⁶⁶ Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.41.

⁵⁶⁷ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.137.

in to find Dessa and the baby sleeping peacefully and she thinks that the ‘darky’s tale of beatings and brandings seemed, in that moment, a lie to cozen the gullible and trade on the goodwill of the openhearted.’⁵⁶⁸ So she asks Dessa directly why she ran away and why her mistress treated her so badly, asking her, ‘why your mistress use you so?’ Dessa answers simply, ‘Cause she can.’ This is a revelation for Ruth and she is stunned by the ‘ring of utter truth’, yet she still finds her hand reaching to remove the cover and see the scars. She ‘blushes’, recognising how ‘humiliating’ this inspection would be. Ruth’s instinctive reaction here provokes her own sense of the precarious state her ignorance confers upon her; she is humbled by her inquisitiveness but she continues to watch Dessa ‘covertly’ because her story is as yet unconfirmed and she is still in the process of allowing others access to the wider notion of truth.⁵⁶⁹

For her part, Dessa is portrayed as understanding that her status means that her word is not enough and that she is subject to the gaze of others. She acknowledges that, ‘Miz lady had to see the goods before she would buy the story.’⁵⁷⁰ Dessa remembers that when she is confronted by the white mistress she mutters ‘something about her trusting in her whiteness and not [their] blackness.’⁵⁷¹ Mae Gwendolen Henderson argues that Dessa’s scars are a kind of male inscription, that ‘the location of the inscriptions—in the area of the genitalia—moreover, signals an attempt to inscribe the sign *slave* in an area that marks her as *woman*.’⁵⁷² But I argue it is also important to reflect on the women who seek to see these scars. What is later revealed to Ruth is that the brand actually reads ‘R’ for rebel. This is pertinent because it is Dessa’s refusal to be a slave or to allow her child to be a slave that marks her out for particular interest, just as,

⁵⁶⁸ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.139; Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child* (1995) depicts Mercer, a former slave who reveals her scarred buttocks and thighs during abolitionist meetings (pp.165-8).

⁵⁶⁹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, P.139; p.141.

⁵⁷⁰ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.189; emphasis in original.

⁵⁷¹ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.189.

⁵⁷² Mae Gwendolen Henderson, ‘Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition’, in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, ed. by Cheryl A. Wall (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.16-37 (p.26); emphasis in original.

influenced by Dessa, Ruth becomes a rebel on her own terms, helping escaped slaves and gulling her fellow white citizens. Fulfilling the project of retrospective fiction, that of re-appraising the past, Ruth is shown to be influenced by what she witnesses, by the privileges afforded to a voyeur. The perspective of the slave and the mistress coalesce here.

This is epitomised by the scene in which Ruth sees the scars. Tension is created, based on the white mistress's voyeurism: 'Rufel entered the house quietly, deep in thought. Hearing a slight noise as she started past the bedroom door, she stopped, pushing the door open silently.' She catches a glimpse of the naked girl, and 'her bottom was so scarred that Rufel thought she must be wearing some kind of garment.' Ruth can barely contain her gasp of shock but also experiences 'sympathy' and finds herself 'regretting' what she has seen, so that, embarrassed, she retreats, closing the door.⁵⁷³ Her practical response is to declare that she will allow the slave girl some 'privacy' to dress and this highlights the fact that Ruth's empathy has been aroused, so that, for this particular white mistress, voyeurism has allowed the beginnings of understanding and compassion.

Nevertheless, this understanding is still associated with the power to look, which is conferred only by white authority and which marks the location of the plantation home as a place of white power. This power is underscored in the novel by the final occasion on which Dessa is obliged to display her scars to others in the sheriff's office. When Dessa is imprisoned on the word of Nehemiah he insists that the sheriff inspects the girl's groin in order to ascertain her identity. An old black woman, Aunt Chloe, is called upon to conduct the inspection. Ruth insists that Dessa belongs to her and it is arguably her intervention that frees Dessa.⁵⁷⁴ Aunt Chloe's eyes are 'so

⁵⁷³ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.154.

⁵⁷⁴ Rushdy considers the scene as evidence of Dessa freeing herself because she reminds Ruth that she wears the money belt and she pays Aunt Chloe with a coin. Rushdy points out that 'she could not trust Rufel or Chloe to act on entirely disinterested motives,' although I would argue that their interests have actually become mutual. Whilst I would agree with Rushdy that Dessa contributes to her own freedom, I believe that the emphasis of the scene and of the power dynamic working in this interaction is not so much on the financial component, but on who is able to see and who is not. Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave*

milky' that she may be blind and the sheriff is dazzled by Ruth, who chooses not to look at the girl, her scars or the money belt and instead turns her look on him and 'bats her eyes at the sheriff.'⁵⁷⁵ By playing the role of genteel white mistress, Ruth secures the freedom of Dessa and their shared access to the financial spoils. Nevertheless, Dessa remains the victim of scrutiny; she is still exposed to the gaze of both Ruth and Aunt Chloe at the request of the sheriff and the power to look remains indisputably a white preserve.

Property, too, considers the specious notion that the permission to look is the natural remit of white people. Manon begins her married life and her narrative as the subject of her husband's proprietary voyeurism. Manon describes how 'his eyes swept over my figure in that rapacious way I find so unsettling,' so that from the outset Manon feels scrutinised by him. Yet it is not only her husband who watches Manon; she too is portrayed seated in front of a mirror, watching herself. She records that on the night the patrollers come to warn Gaudet of an imminent insurrection she retreats to her mirror and, as she describes, 'I bade Sarah brush my hair while I waited for them to leave.' She then records how a fly enters the room and they look at it in the mirror as well as both watching Sarah's hands at work, braiding Manon's hair. This shared watching would appear to suggest an allegiance between the two women, but this idea is immediately dispelled when Manon refers to the fly with the instruction 'kill it.'⁵⁷⁶ This incident is another example of a psychological power struggle between mistress and slave, observed at a remove through a mirror. Part of Manon's power certainly derives from the pretty face she sees in the mirror, and she remembers that her father considered her hair to be 'his golden treasure,' concurring with the tradition that a woman's hair is something to be possessed by her male admirers.⁵⁷⁷

Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.149.

⁵⁷⁵ Williams, *Dessa Rose*, p.229; p.231.

⁵⁷⁶ Martin, *Property*, p.11; p.13.

⁵⁷⁷ Hair too becomes a site of conflict between mistresses and slaves in the slavocracy home: In *Our Nig*, for example, Wilson records how Mrs Belmont takes the shears to

But Manon's reaction to her slave is also associated with her perception of a rival beauty in her own home. This perception is suggested by another scene of voyeurism, in which Sarah approaches Manon before her mirror. Here, Manon notes that 'her reflection obscures my own.' This observation is telling because it precipitates Manon's recollection of seeing her slave girl on the previous night, leaving Gaudet's bed-chamber, enacting, albeit unwittingly, the role of sexual rival. By looking at her slave in this context, the mistress appropriates the male gaze, or at least his permission to look.

In this moment of voyeurism, Manon remembers how Sarah looked so that their respective appearances are brought into conflict in Manon's mind.⁵⁷⁸ But it is more than the appearance of the two women that is contrasted in relation to voyeurism; each of them can be partly defined by their reactions to the spyglass. Manon is drawn to it, despite the fact that she can admit that, 'often, as I look through the glass, I hear in my head an incredulous refrain: *This is my husband, this is my husband.*'⁵⁷⁹ Sarah, on the other hand, refuses to use the spyglass to survey the slave quarters, saying simply, 'I don't like that glass.'⁵⁸⁰ In her uninformative reply, Sarah dons her familiar mask. Sterling's observation, drawn from the historical sources she collected, of the reticence adopted by the slave woman as a form of emotional protection, resonates here:

[U]nder the stress of slavery she had developed tools for survival. One was an understanding of the people in power. As if she were looking through a one-way window, she could observe the behaviour of Mister Charlie and Miss Anne. In her dealings with them she wore a mask that contained her own feelings.⁵⁸¹

Sarah is presented as accepting of the fact that she is the subject of scrutiny but her resistance is to give nothing away, to keep her emotions blank. Manon responds emotively to what she witnesses through the spyglass, but

remove Frado's 'glossy ringlets' (p.38), and Jacobs records how Linda has her 'fine head of hair' shorn close in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (p.64).

⁵⁷⁸ Martin, *Property*, pp.53-5.

⁵⁷⁹ Martin, *Property*, p.5; emphasis in original.

⁵⁸⁰ Martin, *Property*, p.18.

⁵⁸¹ Sterling, p.xv.

she gains no solace from her act of looking. Although the spyglass acts as a central motif, exposing the women's reaction to voyeurism on the plantation, it is telling that it is Manon's eyes which are compared to the windows of a burnt-out house, because in this image her voyeurism is overturned or at least turned back inwards.

Arguably, though, in *Property*, voyeurism in relation to the Gaudet Plantation is extended to include readers. Manon's first-person perspective, as discussed earlier, invites shared complicity. Sabine Broeck posits that what *Property* does is to create a 'voyeuristic white female gaze on white male violence,' and that what it also does with the heroine is to 'position' her as 'a willing—though passive—participant, literally a spy through a looking glass.'⁵⁸² Of course, Manon perpetuates her own share of violence in the novel and it is her guilt and not purely that of the male protagonists, that extends outwards to encompass readers of the novel. As Oates contends, 'we find ourselves in Manon's abject position, forced to observe, unable to intercede,' but this too is arguably an inevitable condition of historical fiction.⁵⁸³ Indeed, one of the features shared by retrospective works of fiction about slavery is that they invite a kind of voyeurism in the mandate to revisit the past.

However, *Property* is a much more provocative work. This provocation is seen crucially in the final line of the novel, because it ends with a question. Manon, reflecting on the actions of Northerners who treated Sarah with respect during her brief period of freedom, asks, 'What on earth did they think they were doing?'⁵⁸⁴ Oates wisely describes this last line as 'a canny question, to be turned back upon the questioner,' yet I posit that it is so much more than this.⁵⁸⁵ It is not Manon who is forced to confront the continued prejudice and ignorance evident in this question, but those who have observed her tale. In its lack of closure, *Property*, like the other

⁵⁸² Broeck, p.12.

⁵⁸³ Oates, p.132.

⁵⁸⁴ Martin, *Property*, p.209.

⁵⁸⁵ Oates, p.140.

retrospective plantation fiction I explore, acknowledges that confronting the past of slavery is unfinished.

Voyeurism, then, is a key feature of the adverse conditions for the women who inhabit the antebellum plantation home in the retrospective fiction I explore here. This feature is captured by the use of the Gothic trope of the mirror. Each of the novels features a mirror scene and the Gothic is invoked in each case by a doubling not only of the mistress who observes herself in the mirror, but by the presence of the female slave who attends her. The mirror scenes in retrospective plantation fiction elucidate the impression that it is both mistress and slave who are subject to scrutiny, attenuating the fraught sense of the mirror as a location of self-perception, as is the case in fiction in general. This comparison can serve to undermine the mistress's confidence by raising unfavourable comparisons with her slave as much as it can lead to victimisation of the slave by leaving her open to judgement.

The novels are also characterised by mutual watching, and this too contributes to the uncanny sense of doubling in this fiction. Another concern of retrospective plantation fiction is the question of who has permission to look. This permission seems to be allocated almost exclusively to the white characters, but while their looking does not have to be furtive it is presented as uneasy. This uneasiness is exemplified by Sapphira's employment of a proxy in Martin to perform the actual seduction of her slave in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. It is exemplified in *Dessa Rose* by the commission of Aunt Chloe to inspect Dessa, on white instructions, and it is also exemplified in *Property* by the reaction of Sarah and Manon to the spyglass, an emblem of voyeurism in the novel. What the three novels also posit is that the white mistress herself is most responsible for scopophilia in the novels, which is unsettling, but more unsettling is the sense that all readers of fiction are voyeurs and returning to the past of slavery enacts a kind of intrusion.

The Plantation Home as a Contested Space

It remains the case that a prevalent image of the plantation has inserted itself into the popular consciousness. The image is one dominated by the big house, a white columned mansion set at the fore of a large, sprawling estate. History records that there were many different types of establishment in slave-owning states, from small holdings to larger concerns, and that the landscape was not entirely dominated by huge plantations. Nevertheless, the idea of the big house has taken root and an entire mythology has grown around the image of luxury and refinement for genteel white citizenry, served by their loyal and biddable black servants. Of course, this mythology has been contested by many and it has also been challenged in retrospective plantation fiction.

Part of the mythology that is most in need of revision is the image of domestic bliss. The white mistress in the fiction I examine rarely benefits from indolence and comfort. Indeed, whilst the mistress may seem to enjoy security on a superficial level, and whilst acknowledging that she of course enjoys more freedom than her slaves, these novels present the white mistress as confined to a domestic sphere that is replete with difficulties. I argue that the kitchen is often a nexus of the tensions and lack of harmony between the white mistress and her female slaves in particular and this is partly because the kitchen is the archetypal domestic space and partly because it is a place often associated with sabotage of the mistress's power through her slaves' acts of resistance.

One aspect of the Gothic to resonate in retrospective plantation fiction is frequent recourse to the *unheimliche*. The plantation is presented as an uncanny space in several respects. It simultaneously offers a place of security for the mistress and bondage for her slave—yet this co-existence is complicated because the white mistress often feels threatened by her slave women, either because of fears concerning their perceived attractiveness to the white men of the household or an inherent sense of threat associated with the presence of an enemy, or rival. Another doubling exists in the geography of the plantation for the fictional white mistresses I examine: for

each, her home has become a place of exile, a place to which she has withdrawn, yet at the same time the plantation is presented as a place of return. This return is enacted literally in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in which the young Cather witnesses the return of Nancy from Canada after a quarter of a century of exile, but it also operates figuratively because in each of the novels the plantation is the setting for the return of the repressed past of slavery. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather returns to her family's legacy as slave-owners in her final novel; in *Dessa Rose*, Williams deliberately conflates two historical events to reconsider the relationship between a white mistress and a female slave; and in *Property* Martin addresses the white mistress's complicity in slavery by providing a compelling first-person perspective.

Another layer of the *unheimliche* is added by undermining the fallacy of the pristine plantation home. This layered effect is witnessed in the two graveyards in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as much as in the differences between the Mill Farm and the slave dwellings; it is evoked by the unfinished storey in *Dessa Rose* and by the devastation of the Gaudet Plantation wreaked by the insurrectionists in *Property*. Moreover, this sense of destruction can be extended to encompass the body of the white mistress, as seen in Sapphira's disability and Manon's disfigurement. This move is also incorporated in the development of the plantation home an *unheimliche* space, as I argue here, because the novels reconsider this space in a trajectory that runs from presenting the plantation as a partially idealised home in *Sapphira in the Slave Girl*, to a destabilised home in *Dessa Rose*, to a dismantled home in *Property*. This project serves to consider the illegitimacy of the myth of domestic bliss in this particular Southern context.

The myth of domestic bliss is further undermined because the plantation is presented as a place marked by claustrophobia not only for the slave but also for the white mistress. Indeed, the retrospective plantation fiction I explore insists that the white mistress is presented as confined by her circumstances. Admittedly, the slave women are manifestly trapped

within the system of slavery for much of the narrative. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Nancy is physically trapped by Martin's advances; in *Dessa Rose*, Dessa is imprisoned in the root cellar; and in *Property* Sarah is relentlessly pursued by slave-catchers and ultimately retained in bondage. Yet, the mistresses are also curtailed because of slavery: Sapphira is not only constrained by her body's physical decline, but by her own insecurities about, and jealousy of, her slave; Ruth is confined by her unrealistic expectations about the role of white mistress as well as her initial prejudices about black women; and Manon is trapped by her dependence on tincture of laudanum, but also by her unwavering commitment to the system of slavery. Claustrophobia embodies the Gothic in all of the novels and yet it is also used to confront the illegitimacy of slavery as part of the project of retrospective plantation fiction; because in the novels I explore the slave in each case has at least a taste of liberty whilst the mistress does not fully enjoy such freedom. Nancy literally escapes to Canada, Dessa is freed by her companions and lives in a community of her choice, and Sarah experiences a time of affirming freedom in the North. But the white mistresses remain at least partially trapped: Sapphira lives out her exile mostly confined to her room at Mill Farm, Ruth wishes to follow the fugitives but must return to mainstream white society, and Manon is relegated to her position as lonely widow with no hope of solace.

Retrospective plantation fiction similarly deals with the Gothic trope of voyeurism. Whilst a state of watchfulness is explored as common to the slave and to the mistress, these novels depict the white mistress as both the central object of scrutiny and the key perpetrator of scopophilia, accommodated in each case by the use of a mirror scene. In each of the novels the mistress is depicted sitting in front of a mirror, but in each case she is accompanied by a female slave, raising questions about the uneasy proximity of mistresses and slaves. The act of reflection in a mirror foregrounds the comparison that can be drawn between mistresses and slaves, underscoring the sense of a *doppelgänger* existing for the white mistress within her plantation home. There is also interplay between the

narcissism of the white mistress and her scopophilia, which is explored by the mistress's scrutiny of her slave women, corresponding to the power dynamic within the household because it highlights the situation that permission to look is limited to the white observer. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* this scrutiny is exemplified by Sapphira watching Nancy and eavesdropping on her conversations. In *Dessa Rose* it is witnessed in Ruth's obsessive observation of the slave as she lies sleeping in her bed, as well as her ardent desire to see Dessa's scars with her own eyes. In *Property*, Manon subjects Sarah to constant scrutiny and her slave's inscrutability is part of the reason she treats Sarah so harshly. The mistress is complicit in voyeurism, forming part of her culpability for the transgressions concerning slavery.

Voyeurism is also extended in retrospective plantation fiction to include readers of the novels. By reflecting upon antebellum slavery as it is portrayed in novels, readers of this fiction necessarily enter into the hermeneutics of coming to terms with complicity and blame. Indeed, the antebellum plantation in fiction is a site that presents slavery as an unresolved chapter of American history. In their emphasis on the home of slave-owners and slaves as an uncanny space, the writers of the fiction about slavery that I consider here draw attention to the tensions between mistresses and slaves within the domestic sphere. In *Spectral America* (2004), Jeffery Andrew Weinstock posits that America's 'contemporary moment is a haunted one.'⁵⁸⁶ Although he is referring to many cultural permutations, I would incorporate his claim to think about the ways in which American culture revisits the site of slavery, as writers continue to pursue the 'ghosts' of slavery's past. Weinstock writes that, 'the ghost is that which interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.'⁵⁸⁷ As I argue here, the plantation home conveys the sense of a

⁵⁸⁶ Jeffery Andrew Weinstock, *Spectral America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p.3.

⁵⁸⁷ Weinstock, p.4.

Gothic space, characterised by claustrophobia and imbued with a sense of voyeurism for both slave and mistress, and as such it operates as a location for the untold story of slavery that persists in being told.

Conclusion

Mine - by the Right of the White Election!

Mine - by the Royal Seal!

Mine – by the sign in the Scarlet prison -

Bars- cannot conceal!

-Emily Dickinson (Poem 528)

Navigating the Culpability and Complexity of the Antebellum White Mistress in Historical Fiction

Telling stories about slavery is not finished. Writers insist upon at least attempting to speak about the unspeakable in America's past. The work of trying to foreground the previously marginalised figure of the white mistress is an important aspect of this cultural process. History is a series of traces and it would be impossible to somehow reach a full understanding of what exactly constituted the lives of white women of the planter class in the antebellum South. Because 'the histories we assign to things and people are composed, created constituted, constructed and always situated literatures', then, the white mistress of history cannot be restored complete.⁵⁸⁸ Nonetheless, history as construction is part of its essence as storytelling. Richard Kearney reflects on Aristotle's proposition that stories are what allow us a shareable world, making events memorable over time and indeed allowing humanity to become historical. Kearney interprets Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* as 'a creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold.'⁵⁸⁹ I find Kearney's insight helpful because literary works which consider the white mistress contribute much to understanding the historical lives of such women, but more than this they help in this process by uncovering and recovering the underlying assumptions and attitudes towards the place of the white mistress in history. This is particularly the case in my thesis as I begin by exploring 'stories' that are contemporary to the period and proceed to focus on 'stories' that respond retrospectively to the antebellum South, through the filter of time.

Slavery continues to exercise American thinking and culture. As I write, April 2011 marks one hundred and fifty years since the beginning of

⁵⁸⁸ Alun Munslow, Preface to Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.xi-xv (p.xi).

⁵⁸⁹ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.12.

the American Civil War. Leonard Pitts Jr. reflects on this anniversary in the Miami Herald. He writes of a continued ‘conspiracy of amnesia’ in Southern consciousness about the causes of the war as well as the persistence of some Southerners to see the war as a heroic enterprise. Pitts notes the example of South Carolina, where a Secession Ball was recently hosted, to ‘honour ancestors for their bravery protecting their homes from invasion.’ He questions the continued reluctance of some to confront the ‘ugly truth’ that secession was caused by the rebel states’ desire to protect their property- ‘that property being defined as four million human beings.’⁵⁹⁰ As such discussions continue to take place in all forms of American commentary it is not surprising that debates about slavery continue to play out in literature. Arnold Rampersad argues that ‘only in grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognising finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it.’⁵⁹¹ Indeed fiction is the ideal locus for grappling with meaning, through imagining the past and engaging this process as a means to possible catharsis. Moving beyond the abolitionist agenda of the earliest slave narratives, post-bellum fiction and later retrospective plantation fiction writers persist in confronting the realities of slavery’s past. In the fiction I explore in this thesis this process has involved a move from elegy for the old South and a lingering admiration of the white slave mistress in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, to a proposal of shared responsibility and the opportunity of coming to terms with the past in *Dessa Rose*, to the painful admission of white female guilt that is witnessed in the portrait of the white mistress in *Property*.

The challenge of confronting the culpability of the antebellum white mistress is itself fraught. It incorporates the specific project not just of trying to re-imagine the past but of re-evaluating aspects of complicity and re-assigning blame. Historical fiction obliges writers to take an attitude to history, and yet, there remains the necessity of recognising the influence of

⁵⁹⁰ Leonard Pitts Jr., The Miami Herald 10th April, 2011, www.miamiherald.com, Accessed April 2011.

⁵⁹¹ Arnold Rampersad, ‘Slavery and the Literary Imagination’ in *Slavery And The Literary Imagination*, ed. by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp.104-124 (p.123).

hindsight and the vicarious nature of any attempt to judge the actions of people living in the past. Writers of retrospective fiction have a duty of care when negotiating former silences in the historical record; they are honour-bound to respect that perspectives change over time. Nevertheless, the force of history in the intervening years means that feigned ignorance is not tenable for retrospective writers, or indeed their readers. Instead of respecting the gaps by more silence the retrospective fiction that I explore directs attention towards the white mistress, effecting an occupation of narrative space. This occupation is achieved through a series of increasingly vivid revelations. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* tells the story of the mistress, with the slave's story relegated to momentary glimpses; *Dessa Rose* opens up the narrative to look at two simultaneous perspectives in relation to the slave and the mistress, but it is *Property* that eventually confronts the white mistress's story from her own perspective, and herein retrospective fiction seeks to imagine the untold story.

The articulation of the story of the white mistress also intensifies over time, acting out another trajectory in retrospective plantation fiction. The trajectory is seen, crucially, in the types of narrative voice deployed in the novels which are explored in this thesis. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* employs an authorial voice which controls the story, apologising for the white mistress's actions towards her slaves, but mitigating any sense of shame with residual respect for Sapphira and the world she represents. Heteroglossia characterises *Dessa Rose* because different voices allow the differing perspectives of the white mistress and her slaves to be heard. This means that the white mistress's actions are explored from her focal point but they are simultaneously cast into relief by the accompanying perspective of the slave Dessa; hence a more rounded judgement is invited in relation to Ruth's guilt. *Property*'s use of a first-person narrator throughout contributes to a forceful confrontation with the culpability of the white mistress. Such a confrontation is achieved partly because Manon's unrelenting monologue makes readers active participants in the white mistress's tale. Despite the fact that Manon is depicted as a repugnant individual, it is natural for

readers to be drawn by a first-person perspective. This focal point also means there is no source of authority in the text; motives and reliability remain unclear, and no definitive sense of resolution is available.

But whilst *Property*'s opening words 'It never ends' suggests lack of resolution, I argue that Martin's novel offers an answering voice to Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. There are particular similarities between the action of *Property* and that of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* that mean that one text can be said to echo the other. Both Nancy and Sarah go on a journey in a carriage with her mistress; the idea that they are inextricably joined is figured in this way. In all of the novels, the white mistress is portrayed in direct counterpoint with her female slave, as I have examined. In many points in *Property* this counterpoint is consciously illuminated by Manon's observations, such as when she looks at Sarah on the night of the insurrection and records that 'In Sarah's look [she] had read the same question [she] had in [her] own mind. How much [does she] know?'⁵⁹² Again counterpointing can be observed in the scene of Manon's mother's death, where Sarah and Manon stoop simultaneously to retrieve a broken plate; in Manon's words, 'we were level there on the floor.'⁵⁹³ The word level is apposite because *Property* enacts a sort of levelling. In this novel there is no sustained heroic escape for Sarah that may serve to ameliorate the mistress's guilt. Unlike in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, or in *Dessa Rose*, in *Property* both mistress and slave remain trapped within the system. I believe that this treatment of claustrophobia moves retrospective plantation fiction beyond glorifying slave resistance or liberation narratives; instead *Property* unfolds the possibility of apologising for slavery by admitting white guilt.

Property serves to demythologise the prevailing myths of the mistress either as passive, an adornment, or as a shrewish demon, because the portrait of Manon is psychologically complex. This demystification makes for a tension between identification and detachment- nearness and distance on behalf of readers of the novel. Complexity is also evident in the novel's

⁵⁹² Martin, *Property*, p.108.

⁵⁹³ Martin, *Property*, p.75.

response to the best known female slave narrative. *Property* reverses the ending of Jacobs's *Incidents*. Jacobs had intended to finish her fictionalised autobiography with a record of John Brown's Harper's Ferry Slave Revolt (1859), but instead her white editor persuaded her to conclude with details of how a white woman helped Linda, Jacobs's alter-ego, to escape. *Incidents* concludes with the words: 'Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.'⁵⁹⁴ *Property* ends not with freedom, but with the bizarre marriage of Sarah with Manon. That *Property* depicts Manon thwarting Sarah's escape attempt and concludes with the slave forced to remain in bondage, eschews an easy reading where white women are portrayed heroically; instead it enacts a further admission of white female complicity because in the end it is Manon's will that Sarah remains a slave. Of Sapphira, Morgenstern argues 'the novel does the work of representing Sapphira as a fond object of remembrance,' but such ambiguity is answered by *Property*'s presentation of Manon.⁵⁹⁵ There is nothing fond in the characterisation of the white mistress in *Property*. Paradoxically the trajectory of retrospective fiction moves from an estrangement from Sapphira to an understanding of Manon, despite her unsympathetic portrayal. In this, Manon's portrait allows an element of catharsis by virtue of offering an admission of white female culpability in slavery. The honesty of *Property* does not lead to simple vilification, though; what it allows is pathos.

If telling stories about slavery is not finished then neither is the remit of retrospective fiction limited to the antebellum South. As Patton rightly notes, 'slavery does not function as a static, a-historical term,' and I have come to recognise that writing about American slavery is not limited to a conventional setting or timescale.⁵⁹⁶ Recent novels continue to inspire readers and win awards. Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. This novel has an antebellum setting, but it departs from conventional fiction about slavery because it confronts the taboo of

⁵⁹⁴ Jacobs, *Incidents*, p.156.

⁵⁹⁵ Morgenstern, p.188.

⁵⁹⁶ Patton, p.xv.

black slave-masters, through its exploration of the Townsends and their community. Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* won the Commonwealth Writer's prize in 2007.⁵⁹⁷ It moves the action of its slave heroine, Aminata, from Africa via Revolutionary era North America to Nova Scotia, returning to Africa once again. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) tells the story of a young slave named Florens and is set in North America in the Seventeenth Century. Clearly, the project of re-imagining and seeking to understand slavery is far from resolved. Indeed, I am compelled by novelist Caryl Phillips's rejection of what he discerns as the current trend towards 'narrative that collapses into a message.'⁵⁹⁸ There is no single message to be found in retrospective plantation fiction and no simple judgement of the white mistress's complicity in slavery is pronounced. Instead the novels that have captured my interest in this thesis contribute to a much broader project, that of not only confronting the culpability of the antebellum white mistress, but of appraising her complexity.

⁵⁹⁷ The novel was originally published in Canada and was re-named *Someone Knows My Name* before publication in the United States of America.

⁵⁹⁸ Caryl Phillips, unpublished talk, Newcastle University, 22nd March, 2010.

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